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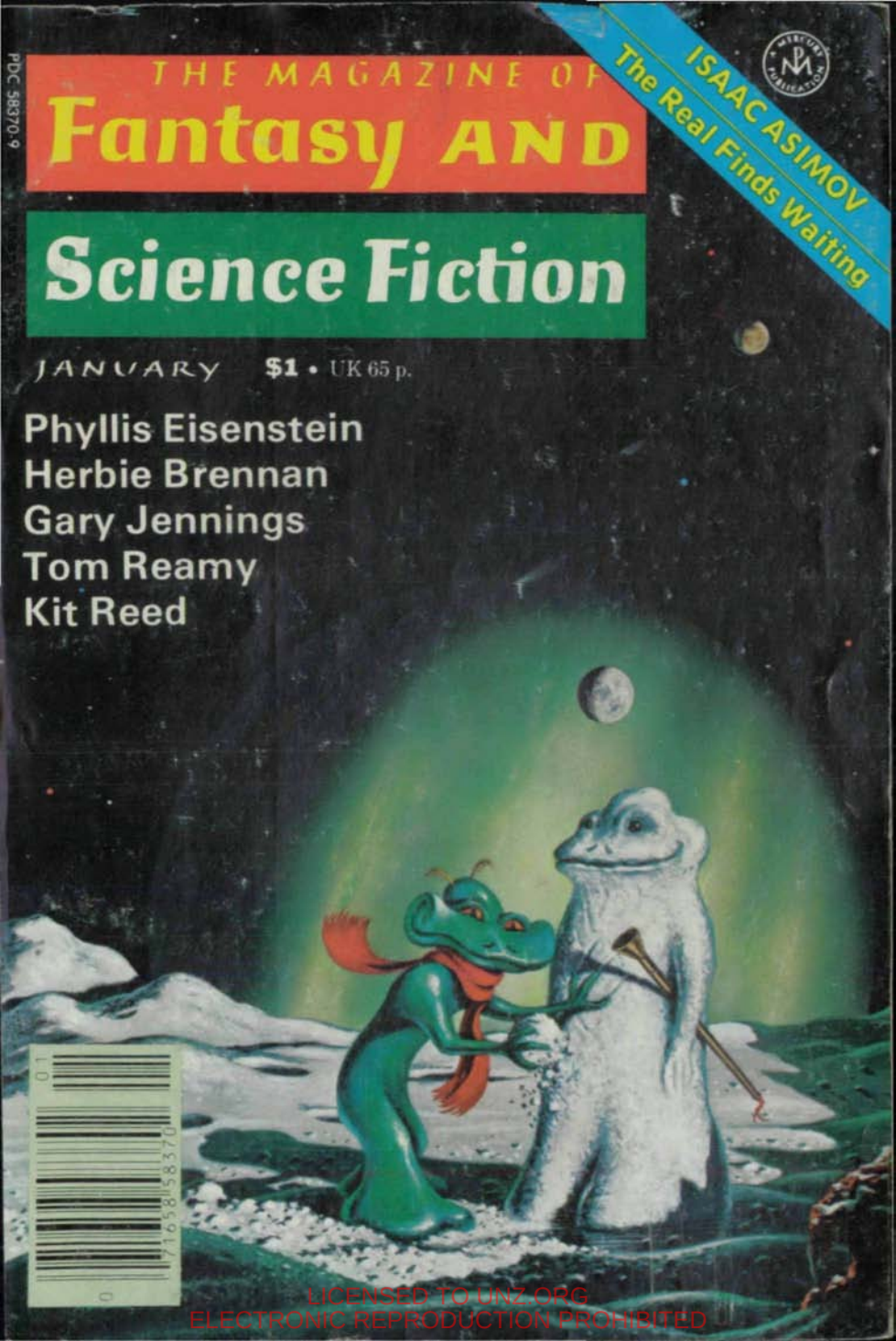

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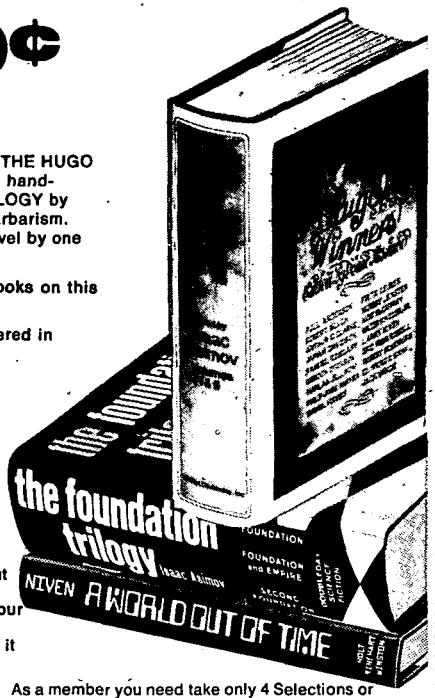

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NOVELETS

INSECTS IN AMBER	**TOM REAMY**	**32**
SEASTATE ZERO	**JEFFREY A. CARVER**	**88**
KINGDOM COME	**GARY JENNINGS**	**137**

SHORT STORIES

TIME LORD	**HERBIE BRENNAN**	**6**
SHAN	**KIT REED**	**80**
IN ANSWER TO YOUR CALL	**PHYLLIS EISENSTEIN**	**113**

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS	**JOHN CLUTE**	**24**
CARTOON	**GAHAN WILSON**	**76**
FILMS: *Sinbad, Stay Home!*	**BAIRD SEARLES**	**77**
SCIENCE: *The Real Finds Waiting*	**ISAAC ASIMOV**	**126**
ACROSTIC PUZZLE	**GEORGIA F. ADAMS**	**158**

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Herbie Brennan ("The Armageddon Decision," September 1977) has a fine knack for rendering bold and surprising concepts into short, suspenseful and utterly convincing stories, e. g., this tale of time travel to the days of the cold and fanatical Third Reich.

Time Lord

by HERBIE BRENNAN

There was a parade that night. Jung stood in the shadow of a doorway and watched the cheerful ranks of Hitler Youth, their faces shining in the torchlight. Then there were bands, then stone-faced columns of SS, marching like robots. He knew what it would be like in the stadium. He could see the banners and the flags, the searchlights cutting pillars into the night sky. It would be stage managed by Speer, who was a master of spectacular.

Curiously enough, the watching crowds along the route were thin. Perhaps the cold kept them away. Perhaps they were simply disappointed that the Fuhrer himself would not be there. The Fuhrer's movements were, of course, a security secret, but word always seemed to get round when he decided to lead a parade. Not this time, though, and the negative inference proved correct. Jung studied the armored cars of the dignitaries with consuming interest, but only one figure looked familiar — a fat man in Luftwaffe grey who might have been Goering.

The parade passed and the crowd, what there was of it, drifted in its wake to the stadium or to whatever little warmth there was in German homes. Jung moved out from the doorway and walked along streets that were almost deserted. He was disobeying orders and experiencing a profound sense of unreality — the essential reason for his orders in the first place. But somehow he found the experience impossible to resist.

In the Old Quarter of the city he was stopped and questioned brusquely by two members of the Gestapo. He watched their change of attitude with grave amusement as they examined his credentials. Both actually saluted as he walked away. He kept thinking how young

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and fresh they looked, not at all what he had expected Gestapo men to be.

Sometime before midnight, he returned to the *pension*, an incredibly middle-class establishment where appearances were maintained at all costs. The *Frau* had even left him some thin slices of wurst and a tiny loaf of hard black bread in his room. He ignored both and climbed, with a sense of wonder, into the brass-framed bed. On the wall above his bed was the popular portrait of the Fuhrer as a Knight of the Grail. Beside it, as if to establish the pension's historical loyalties, was a framed photograph of the late Kaiser.

To Jung's surprise, he found the bed neither claustrophobic nor particularly uncomfortable. As he slid into sleep, he thought of Bickermann. The search had to start in the morning.

There was a small, excited crowd in the Wilhelmplatz. As Jung drew closer, he could hear it shouting encouragement to a group of men in Wehrmacht uniform who had surrounded an old tramp. One of the soldiers was issuing orders. The rest, smiling, were prodding at the old man. Although they were offering no actual violence, he was trembling like a nervous horse. Jung noticed the yellow *megan David* sewn to the sleeve of his tattered greatcoat.

The public address system started some announcement as Jung skirted the edges of the crowd. He was glad of the diversion, although he felt it unlikely that he would be noticed in any case or, even if noticed, that he would be detained. The calculations suggested it was a little too early for that, unless he was very unlucky. All the same, the sense of unreality he had experienced the previous night was gone now in the morning sunshine, and, irrationally, he felt a twinge of fear. In a way he welcomed the emotion. It would help him keep in character.

He found the synagogue with difficulty — it did not do to ask directions to such a place. The building itself was gutted, as were several shops and houses in the narrow street. Presumably all had been fired during the riotous night of November 9. But there was no fear for Bickermann. The records showed he had suffered a peripheral attack and was actually beaten unconscious but had survived the experience with only minor injuries.

Part of the synagogue facade had fallen into the street. An old woman with an empty shopping basket was picking her way through the rubble. Jung stepped in front of her and she stopped without looking up.

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Herr Bickermann," Jung said softly.

She looked up, wide brown eyes staring through a cloud of apathy. Her hair was matted, almost totally grey. "Mendel?" she asked. "Is it Mendel?"

Jung nodded. "Mendel Bickermann." He waited. He was far taller than she, but he had forced his body into a stooping stance which held no threat. She would see the Semitic features, the threadbare clothing, the star on his armband which marked him out as one of her own, and she would feel no threat. Even if she demanded papers, he had them. They were forged, of course, but Himmler himself could not have told them from the real thing. It was unlikely she would demand to see his papers anyway. Only a fool would wear the yellow star if he were not a Jew.

In fact, she lost interest in him almost at once. The eyes went down to the rubble and she began to shuffle forward again. He stepped aside, but took her gently by the arm. "Mendel Bickermann," he urged. "You know him?"

Her voice came out flat and apathetic. "I know him. I know him. What for do you want Mendel Bickermann?"

"I need to talk to him, Momma," Jung said.

"This is young Mendel Bickermann?"

For a moment the question puzzled him. Then his cultural briefing came to the rescue. Bickermann's father was also called Mendel and would be alive even now, nodding away his last years in the middle of a nightmare. To differentiate, the community would call the man Jung wanted "Young Mendel." The father would, presumably, be "Old Mendel." This woman was the father's generation. She would require the differentiation.

"Yes, Momma," Jung said. "Young Mendel. I need to talk to young Mendel."

It seemed she was not going to answer him. She shuffled on, despite the restraining hand. Then she said, half to herself, "Young Mendel is not here. Not here ..."

"Where is he, Momma?"

She shrugged. "Who knows? They took him away."

He released her arm. There was no need to ask who *they* were. It was a development as unwelcome as it was unexpected. Nothing in the calculations suggested Bickermann had been seized by the Gestapo at this stage of his career. But the calculations were not infallible. A thought struck him: it might, perhaps, be only temporary seizure, for questioning. He would have to inquire further.

Surprisingly, the old woman turned. "He was my man," she said sadly.

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"Your son?" Jung experienced a curious emotion he could not immediately identify.

The old woman said tonelessly, "My husband."

There was no hint of Mendel Bickermann in the district, no hint of where he might have been taken. Jung's inquiries were met with blankness, bitterness, apathy and fear, but no one could help. They had taken Mendel as they took so many Jews. Who knew where they had taken him?

It was growing dark when he finally left this quarter of the city. He had more than half decided to report back to headquarters, seek fresh instructions now that the calculations were shown to have broken down. He was only supposed to use the communicator at set times, of course, but that did not worry him unduly. The present situation had all the earmarks of a minor emergency. Besides, there was no way the Germans could intercept his communication: the technology was lacking.

Something struck him in the small of the back, not a particularly painful blow, but enough to make him stagger slightly. He retained just enough self-possession to remain in character as he turned. He found himself facing a group of youths, perhaps half a dozen in all. Abstractedly, he noticed the blond hair and clean-cut features, like a badge of office. One of them said something sharply, but Jung could not catch what it was. He stared at the boy and waited, thinking of the scene in the Wilhelmplatz that morning.

"Your papers, Jew!" the boy repeated angrily. He was tall, well built, but could not have been more than eighteen.

Jung fumbled in his greatcoat for his papers. It was an interesting development, for none of these boys were in uniform and so, presumably, had no right to ask him for anything. Nevertheless, the tone of authority in the boy's voice showed he expected obedience from anyone wearing the yellow star. Jung handed across his identification.

"We're wasting time, Karl," one of the other youths called.

Karl glanced at the papers and dropped them on the ground. He smiled slightly. "Pick them up, Jew."

The street, Jung noticed, was deserted. A mild drizzle polished the cobblestones, causing them to reflect back lights. Jung bent to pick up his papers, aware of a sudden tension in the group of youths. Karl's foot lashed out and caught him in the side; then the others were on him, shrieking. He saw a knife flash.

Jung killed two of them before the others realized what was hap-

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pening. They broke away, a sudden dawning of fear on their faces. Jung kicked the nearest to him, snapping off a rib and sending it inwards to puncture the heart. He swung and blinded another before snapping the neck. The remaining two broke and ran, their faces locked in an expression of panic. Since it was vital there should be no witnesses, Jung raced after them, praying no one else would appear on the deserted street. Fortunately, the boys had not the experience to separate, and so he caught up with them simultaneously. He could not use his major weaponry, for the traces would have been too obvious. But he risked the finger dart, calculating that the pinprick would never be noticed. Both youths dropped like stones. He fractured the skull of each corpse to present an apparent cause of death, then walked away quickly. He dodged into an alley and started to run. He did not slacken his pace until he was well away from the area.

It was not until he was changing his clothes that he noticed he had been wounded, a deep knife slash almost eighteen inches long across his ribs. The healing vaccine had already taken care of most of the damage, so that he was no longer losing blood, but he could not help thinking what would have happened had the boy stabbed instead of slashed. It was an object lesson in the truth of the warnings which had been drummed into him: the environment might seem unreal, but it could kill him just the same.

He returned to the pension, having firmly decided he would not contact headquarters yet. There were, after all, other avenues of approach open to him.

Jung wondered at his emotions as the Mercedes pulled into Prinz Albrechtstrasse. He felt nervous for the first time since he had arrived in this alien Third Reich. The environment was even more primitive than he had imagined, primitive to the point of savagery. And the dangers were all too real, as he had discovered last night.

"No. 8," he told his driver shortly and sank back into the upholstery as the car purred down the roadway.

They stopped outside the Chancellery. Jung got out and waved the driver on. As the car pulled away, he stared up for a moment at the heavy, grey building with its crowning adornment of swastika flags. Then he walked towards the entrance. The SS sentries, standing like automata on either side of the door, stiffened slightly at the sight of his uniform. As he walked inside, another SS soldier moved to greet him, snapping out the curious, straight-armed salute these people used. "Heil Hitler!"

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Jung nodded a leisurely acknowledgement and glanced around him. The entrance hall was vast and very high. Uniformed men were everywhere, moving with such purposeful haste that they gave the impression of an ant colony.

"May I assist you in any way, Herr Obergruppenfuhrer?" the SS man asked with deference.

Jung smiled. "This is my first opportunity to visit Headquarters," he said. "It is ... impressive."

"Thank you, Herr Obergruppenfuhrer."

Jung nodded again. "My business is with the Director of the Archives. Berlin Division, Jewish Section. You will inform him, please."

"At once, Herr Obergruppenfuhrer!"

The man vanished. Jung waited and was eventually approached by an SS Lieutenant. "Your papers, Herr Obergruppenfuhrer. A formality ...."

"Of course." Jung handed over his special credentials. They were signed — ostensibly — by Himmler himself. The calculations showed Himmler would not be at Headquarters at this time, but even if the calculations were as mistaken as they had been about Bickermann's whereabouts, it was extremely unlikely that anyone would check all the way to the top.

The Lieutenant handed back the papers and saluted. "Please be good enough to follow me."

The Director of the Archives was a plump, uniformed man in rimless glasses. He smelt of fear. "You wish to see the file on this Bickermann, Herr Obergruppenfuhrer? The actual file? It is irregular ..." He trailed off as Jung stared at him coldly. "But with your authorization, of course ...."

Bickermann, it transpired, was not important enough to have a file of his own. The Director eventually located him in a lengthy listing headed, puzzlingly, *Jewish Relocation.* A date had been written after his name in black ink.

"You will explain this to me," Jung said shortly.

The Director of the Archives looked up at him in surprise. "The man Bickermann has been scheduled for relocation, Herr Obergruppenfuhrer."

"Relocation where and when?"

"All persons on this listing —" He stopped. He was sweating. "I assure you everything is in order, Herr Obergruppenfuhrer."

Jung made an angry, impatient gesture. "I'm sure everything is in order. I simply wish to find the current whereabouts of this Jew."

"An order of *Schutzhaft* has been processed, Herr Obergruppenfuhrer."

"Protective custody?" Jung nodded. "So?"

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"He is to be taken to Dachau," the Director of the Archives said.

TWO

Mendel Bickermann felt no fear, nor even confusion or surprise. He felt nothing and wondered vaguely in the darkness why he felt nothing. He was aware of the crush of bodies around him, aware of the stink and the fetid air, aware of the numbness in his feet, the pain from the varicose vein in his left leg, aware of the jolting of the train, the groans, the sobbing, the murmured prayers, the incessant, nerve-grating whining of a child. But it was as if he was listening with someone else's ears, feeling with someone else's body. He stood staring blankly into the darkness.

They had not told him where they were taking him, nor had they told him why. They had been stiff and formal, as the Hitler Germans always were, and curiously polite. But their eyes were like steel and they answered none of his questions. At the station he was herded onto a cattle car — less politeness now, more small brutalities — along with scores of men, women and chidren. He spotted no familiar faces, but all the passengers had one thing in common: the yellow star on their armbands. A young man with wild eyes, almost certainly a Communist judging by his treatment at the hands of the guards, told him they were going to Sachsenhausen. But Bickermann no longer believed it. The journey had lasted too long for that.

The train stopped, shuddered forward, then stopped again. There was a curious surging movement in the crowd, like waves on the sea, but no one could move much. They were too tightly packed for that. After a time there was a clanking noise and the gates of the car were pulled open. Bickermann blinked at the light, then was half carried from the car as everyone moved, almost unconsciously, towards the semblance of freedom.

For a time he underwent a jumble of impressions. The wave of chill clean air after the heat of the train. The expressions on the faces of the guards, distaste and boredom predominating. A woman weeping, another screaming. A brutal interlude during which a gun butt smashed the nose of a fat man into bloody pulp. Some form of segregation, which meant nothing to Bickermann since he was, in any case, alone. The formation of queues, straggling, hopeless queues. Shouted orders. The pluming of breath in the cold air. And the word which passed along the line like a butterfly: *Dachau. They have taken us to Dachau.*

He marched, because he was ordered to march, and no one offered him any violence. He

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marched between high gates opening out of fences of barbed wire, guarded by machine-gun towers. He stopped before a small man, dapper in the black SS uniform. He marched again and found himself in some sort of reception hall with a long, bare wooden table manned by bespectacled SS men who looked less like soldiers than civil servants in uniform. He gave up his papers and his greatcoat and his boots and his own spectacles and shuffled along in a blur to the end of the table where he had to give up the remainder of his clothing. His body shivered, but he still felt like a thing apart. A stern-faced man handed him something and prodded him forward.

"They are going to kill us!" It was no more than a whisper, but it spread. Bickermann could feel the swelling panic in the crowded hall.

"You are going to the baths," a voice called loudly. "It is necessary that you are deloused and disinfected." Bickermann looked down at his hand. The guard had given him a small square of gritty soap.

He shuffled naked through the door and found himself in the open, in a courtyard. Guards directed the line to the bathhouse. There was a story Bickermann had heard almost a year ago that sometimes Jews were led into some sort of death chamber on the pretext that they were actually going to the bathhouse. But Bickermann did not believe it. When his turn came, he walked willingly through the bathhouse door, for he was grateful to get out of the biting cold of the courtyard.

There was something about Munich that Jung disliked instantly and intensely. The atmosphere was somehow even colder, more fanatical than Berlin. He left the train in civilian clothes, his papers now identifying him as an industrialist, an important man from the Ruhr. He carried a new, leather briefcase, packed with death.

A Gestapo officer was checking credentials at the turnstile, perhaps as a routine, perhaps in search of some missing criminal or political agitator. Jung queued with the same stolid patience his fellow commuters displayed and presented his papers stone-faced. The officer checked them, looked him over, then said politely, "Welcome to Munich, Herr Remer. Enjoy your visit."

"Thank you," Jung nodded.

There was another Gestapo officer standing by the desk clerk in his hotel, strongly suggesting something unusual was going on. Jung had overheard some casual talk on the train about political unrest — presumably the reason why the police were about in such force. He felt a slight irritation. If too many

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were about, it would make his own job that much more difficult. He went up to his room feeling suddenly tired. Since he had already decided not to make his first move until nightfall, he secured the door and lay down to sleep.

He awoke in agony. Waves of pain flowed along his body and sang through the caverns of his mind. For a moment he felt confused, then realized he was suffering a side effect of the personality imprint. The psychologists had warned him it might happen, even predicted that if it did happen, it would happen after sleep. There was no way to give a relatively normal man the reactions Jung had now without setting up strains somewhere. Normally they remained unconscious. But occasionally ....

He lay still and waited for the pain to pass. After a time it did, leaving him refreshed rather than exhausted. He rose from the bed and drew back the curtains. It was dark outside. He left the hotel and walked two blocks before he found an unattended Mercedes.

Bickermann stood beneath an icy shower and lathered himself, as ordered, with the gritty soap. Somewhere in the back of his mind, an insane, smug voice congratulated him on the fact that he had not taken the death chamber rumors seriously. Things were bad under Hitler, but not, thank God, that bad. He moved on, as ordered, to a second shower which stung his skin with strongly smelling disinfectant. At the end of the room, he was permitted to dry himself with a small damp towel, then issued with fresh clothes.

To his surprise, they fitted reasonably well.

He went outside and joined the featureless crowd of work camp inmates, all dressed like himself now in the rough, grey prison uniform. The guards eventually herded them to their huts. Bickermann sat in a corner and stared, apathetically, at a cockroach crawling down a crack between the floorboards. The insect was a blur to him. They had not given him back his spectacles.

Work began at dawn next morning. The prisoners, Bickermann amongst them, were paraded in the courtyard for a roll call, then broken into groups and issued, individually, spades and picks. Bickermann's detail was marched beyond the camp to a quarry. Guards in greatcoats watched over them with expressionless faces. Bickermann swung his pick.

By noon, he was wondering if he could survive the day. Every muscle in his body ached, every nerve and fiber screamed for rest. He caught rest in snatches, when he thought

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the attention of the guards might be directed elsewhere. But even these brief pauses filled him with fear. The guards had already beaten one worker unconscious because he had told them he was unable to go on.

There was no break and no food. In the afternoon, the screamed orders from the guards became more frequent. Two other men were badly beaten, and a third simply collapsed where he stood and had to be dragged away. Bickermann lost track of time. Events ran together into a painful blur until at one point, almost reluctantly, he realized the order was to stop. As he set down his pick, he noticed that the handle was slippery with blood and stood staring for a moment at the raw ooze of his hands. He did not feel he could walk, but he did walk, a stumbling, shuffling walk urged on by screams and prodding from the guards.

He reached the camp in a daze, as if he was running a high fever. He answered his name on the second roll call, but had not enough energy left to join the queue for food. No one seemed to object when he staggered to the hut. Once inside, he collapsed and slept from sheer exhaustion.

Bickermann awoke abruptly with a stabbing pain in his side. He half rolled, then looked up to find a guard looming over him.

"Get up!" The guard's boot caught him in the side again, not particularly viciously, but with enough force to hurry him to his feet. His muscles felt painful, but the blur of exhaustion was gone. Both his hands had frozen into immobility.

"Bickermann? You are the Jew Bickermann?"

Bickermann nodded. He felt frightened. The guard was very tall, very burly.

"You will report to the commandant. Come with me."

He staggered out after the guard, his emotions a mixture of terror and wild, surging hope. It was possible — just possible — that he had been bought out. Such things happened. In the community, they said it was a favorite way of boosting SS funds. A Jew would be taken to the camp not because he'd done anything, but because his freedom could be sold. Bickermann's family had little money now — not like the days before Hitler came to power. But he still had friends. Perhaps someone had heard and put up the money ....

The commandant's office was in a small wooden building near the gate of the compound. The guard who had brought Bickermann pushed him through the door without ceremony. He raised his head and felt the hope drain out of him.

The commandant was the dap-

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per little man he remembered seeing when he first entered the camp. He was seated behind his desk with a sheaf of papers in front of him. Beside him was a tall, blond, hawk-faced man in an SS general's uniform. The stranger stared at Bickermann with cold blue eyes.

"The Jew Bickermann," the guard said.

"This is the Jew Bickermann, Obergruppenfuhrer Meinecke," the commadant said.

Meinecke, the tall, blond SS general, stared at Bickermann. "What's the matter with his hands?"

The commandant glanced at Bickermann's blood-soaked hands in surprise. "He has been on work detail. These Jews have soft hands."

"Too much soft living at the expense of the German people," Meinecke nodded.

"Indeed so, Obergruppenfuhrer Meinecke," the commandant agreed enthusiastically. They both stared at Bickermann.

Meinecke glanced at the papers on the desk. "This is his complete file?"

"Ja, Herr Obergruppenfuhrer."

"You have prepared the release documents for me to sign?"

"They are here also."

The blond general nodded. "Then we should not delay. I shall require suitable transport with —" He paused thoughtfully. "— not more than two guards."

"Of course, Herr Obergruppenfuhrer." The commandant made a note on his file. "And your own car?"

Meinecke shrugged. "I shall have it collected tomorrow."

Bickermann was hustled into a military vehicle, sandwiched in the back seat between two armed guards. The icy Obergruppenfuhrer Meinecke sat in the front beside the driver staring straight ahead. No one told Bickermann what was happening. They left the camp in a flurry of Hitler salutes.

Some four or five miles outside Dachau, Meinecke, who had been sitting like a robot, said something to the driver. A short distance afterwards, they turned off the main road. Inside ten minutes, they were driving through a wood. Meinecke snapped another command to the driver and the vehicle stopped. Meinecke got out. "Take the Jew and come with me!"

Only lack of food prevented Bickermann's involuntary bowel movement. His mind turned to ice. He had overheard the word "release" between the general and the commandant. Now he knew what the word meant. The guards pushed him roughly and he stumbled. Meinecke, striding ahead, scarcely noticed. Prodded by the guards, staggering through a night-

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mare, Bickermann followed him to a clearing out of sight of the car. One of the guards muttered something sourly about "execution detail," as if it was an inconvenience which had upset his plans for the day. Meinecke stopped. "Stand the Jew by that tree and step back forty paces."

Bickermann began to shiver. He wanted to look away from the guards, but could not. He saw them halt with military precision and raise their rifles in anticipation of the next order. Meinecke, face expressionless as ever, stood a step or two behind them. One of the guards glanced round at him, then folded up and slid, quite slowly, to the ground. His companion stared at him in astonishment, then twisted and slumped in a heap. No one spoke. There had been no sound. Bickermann stood blankly as the SS general walked briskly towards him. "My apologies for the unpleasant charade, Professor Bickermann. It was the only way to free you."

THREE

"Who are you?" Bickermann asked.

"My name is Jung," the SS general told him. He was driving expertly and very fast, having — incredibly — killed the driver as well as the guards.

"Not Meinecke?"

"A temporary identity. Most of my identities are temporary."

"You are not with the SS?"

"No."

"But you are German?" Nothing was making sense, but a wild thought had crossed Bickermann's mind that this man might be some sort of undercover agent, perhaps from France. In the present international situation; God alone knew what sort of clandestine operations were going on.

"The German state does not exist in my time," Jung said incomprehensibly.

Bickermann frowned. He hesitated. "You are perhaps ... Jewish?" He looked at the superlatively Aryan features.

Jung shook his head. "Not in the sense you mean it."

Bickermann sat back in his seat. He felt confused.

After a long time, he asked, "Where are we going?"

"To Berchtesgaden," Jung said. "The calculations show Hitler was there this week."

The man Jung was mad. He was now calling himself Pifraeder (and apparently had the papers to prove it). Worse still, since he had abandoned the Obergruppenfuhrer's uniform, he no longer looked so Aryan. His features seemed heavier, softer, and the hair had gone several shades darker, presumably the result of dye.

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But this was not his madness. His madness was what he believed, what he was planning to do.

It was a cool, calm, almost easy-going madness, and that made it all the more terrifying. That and his success so far. That and his incredible ability to kill without emotion.

"What period of the future?" Bickermann asked, perhaps humoring the man, although he could no longer be sure of anything and had grown fascinated, to the point of obsession, with his fantasy.

Jung shrugged. "It would be impossible to tell you. We measure time differently."

"Yes," Bickermann said, "I can accept the idea of a new era, but you can tell me in terms of the number of years which will elapse between now and your own day." His scientific training pushed its way to the fore, and he added, half consciously, "Defining a year as the time taken for a single terrestrial orbit of the sun."

"Unfortunately the period has varied." Jung smiled. They were lunching in an inn tucked away in a Berchtesgaden side street. The dining room was almost deserted, making this lunatic conversation possible.

Jung said, "In effect, it is difficult for me to be sure I am from your future. There is a small, but distinct, possibility that my era stands in the past in relation to yours — or what you would term the past. These things are more complicated than you realize."

To his surprise, Bickermann found himself smiling back. This was, at least, a likable madman. Then he remembered the plans for the afternoon, and the smile faded. To take his mind off them, he asked, "Did you travel here — I mean here to this time — in some sort of machine?"

Jung shook his head as he was finishing a mouthful of food. "I am a Time Lord."

Bickermann waited for him to continue, but it became obvious Jung thought he had explained everything. "What's a Time Lord?" Bickermann asked bluntly.

"We don't know," Jung said.

The man was mad. Bickermann, a little more calm now that he'd eaten, turned his attention to more pressing problems. "Are you going to tell me why we're going to see Hitler?" Jung had evaded that issue too, up to now.

There was a pause while Jung stared at him blankly. Then he said, "It's unimportant that you believe anything I've told you so far, but it's quite important you believe this." He waited.

Bickermann nodded encouragingly, knowing that he would not believe.

"I want to tell you something about my own era," Jung said. "It

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will perhaps explain why I'm here ... and why you're here." He took a deep breath, sighed. "You ask how far in time I have traveled to reach you. I tell you I do not know. Perhaps you feel I am being evasive, but that is not so. You are a very intelligent man, Professor. You are more intelligent than you realize, more intelligent than your contemporaries realize. Your worth will not be recognized for many years to come — until long after you are dead, in fact, if that reference does not disturb you."

"No," Bickermann said. "Not at all." He smiled slightly. The distant contemplation of his death was nothing compared to what he had been through, nothing compared to the prospect the afternoon held.

"Intelligent though you are," Jung said seriously, "you are not equipped to grasp the extent of the changes between your culture and my own." He shrugged. "I don't know how far they are separated in time, but it can't be that much. In evolutionary terms the differences between us are negligible. I understand you would have been born with a vermiform appendix. I was not. Also, I have one less toe on each foot than you have. But I could still breed with your women, and so the differences are not extreme. At a mental level, however, the differences *are* extreme. So extreme that you could not communicate with me at all."

"I am communicating with you," Bickermann pointed out reasonably.

"You are communicating with a personality imprint. It's rather different."

"Oh," Bickermann said blankly.

"I am not going to try to explain this," Jung said, "because ultimately it is unimportant. I am aware that I generally appear cold and characterless to you —" He waved his hand to stifle the automatic polite rejection. "— for the very good reason that, in this form, I *am* cold and characterless. A personality imprint is a very limited thing. It enables me to experience very little emotional tone. I have small fears and small joys and small conscience. It is temporary and necessary. I fear that even you, Professor, appear colorless to me— fleshless, bloodless. This is an effect of my time journey, as well as the limitations of my personality imprint. Nonetheless, I treat you with respect because of what you are and because of what you will become."

He stretched and sighed again. "All this I tell you in the hope that you may understand a little. I could even describe exactly how I got here, but it would be utterly meaningless to you. Time Lords are rare, one in a hundred million. It is a

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talent, like the psionic talent of making music. When the imprint is removed from my mind, I see things differently. I have direct experience of the dimensional mesh, and at given times I can move within it. This makes me a Time Lord, but you will not understand."

"No," Bickermann agreed. He felt a weird fascination.

"None of this is the reason why I am here. I can travel but I could not function here without the cooperation of my culture. That cooperation is not given simply to afford me a holiday. A minor problem of my culture is communication with an extraterrestrial lifeform." He stopped. "Forgive me — perhaps you do not believe in extraterrestrial life?"

Bickermann hesitated. "It's an interesting philosophical problem ..."

"It is not philosophical and it is not a problem in my era. We know extraterrestrial races exist. That is not a problem in my era. The problem in my era is communicating with them. Strangely enough, that problem has been solved in yours — that is why I am here."

Bickermann held up one hand. "Just a minute. Are you saying someone here and now has managed to communicate with ... with men — life — on some other planet?"

Jung shook his head. "Try to rid your mind of cultural preconceptions, Professor. The life forms are not associated with another planet. They are associated with the spaces between the Outer Planets of this system. And beyond, but those are not the forms which interest us. Nor are they the forms which you can currently reach."

Now Bickermann sighed. "Planets — spaces — are you telling me there is someone on Earth today who can talk to intelligences that are not of this Earth?"

"Yes," Jung said.

Bickermann frowned at him thoughtfully, for the moment completely caught up in the fantasy. "Who?"

"You, Professor." He paused. "And Adolf Hitler."

FOUR

"This will never work!" hissed Mendel Bickermann in something approaching panic. "They would never let a Jew within a hundred yards of the Fuhrer!"

"You're not a Jew any more," Jung said cheerfully. "You are Fedor von Bonhoeffer and your papers show an impeccable Aryan pedigree." They were walking — actually *walking* — the final mile to the Berghof, so far without meeting any guards. "Besides," Jung added, "we are expected."

It was insane. Yet this lunatic

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had rescued him from Dachau, had an inexhaustible supply of forged identifications. Most important of all, Bickermann's own photograph was on the identity card which showed him to be von Bonhoeffer. There must be something more to it than madness.

Besides, this creature Jung could change his appearance. He was far darker now, and plumper, and apparently older. He walked with a slight limp. Bickermann followed him as if attached by invisible ropes. It was insane, but what else was there to do?

They reached the gates of Hitler's mountain villa and were immediately challenged by two well-armed guards. Jung smiled at them and waved his papers merrily. He seemed determined to act the buffoon. But to Bickermann's intense surprise, the gates were opened almost immediately. In a moment they were being shown inside by a polite young male secretary in civilian clothes. The man was actually apologizing to Jung for the fact that Hitler had not met them personally.

"He is with Reichsmarschall Goering, Herr Pifraeder. No disrespect is intended, as I'm sure you will understand. You can wait for him in the study — I shall arrange for some tea to be sent in to you."

"Capital," Jung said heartily. "Capital."

There was a magnificent view of the Alps through the study window. The room itself was quite small and bore the unmistakable stamp of feminine middle-class taste. As the door closed, Bickermann asked urgently, "You are known to the Fuhrer?"

"He thinks he knows me. The memory is a temporary implant. It will fade a few hours after we leave. He stared through the window. "A permanent trace might have been more useful, but such things are difficult, even for our technology."

The secretary proved as good as his word, for a serving maid appeared almost at once with a tray of tea and cakes. Jung beamed at her, washed his hands together and said, "Ah, tea — capital." He reached for a cup. "Will you have tea, my dear Herr von Bonhoeffer?"

When they were alone again, Bickermann found his early fears, his early confusions abruptly replaced by an upsurge of anger. "Listen, Jung —"

Jung wagged a finger. "Pifraeder. Here you must always say Pifraeder."

"Pifraeder, then — listen to me! I'm sick of this lunacy. I don't know how you got us in here, but I —"

"Don't believe all that nonsence about Time Lords and extraterrestrials?" Jung finished for him.

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"Quite right, von Bonhoeffer. No intelligent man believes the outlandish without proof." He shrugged. "Perhaps later ...."

"Perhaps I shall simply leave now."

Jung smiled. "Without me? They would kill you."

Bickermann stared at him, astonished by the sudden flash of coldness. But warmth had returned to Jung's eyes now. "Forgive me, Herr Professor, I know how difficult this must be for you. Perhaps you would feel more secure with this —"

Bickermann took the gun, wide-eyed. It was a Luger automatic, beautifully balanced and very deadly. The man had smuggled a gun into the presence of the Fuhrer!

"Do you know how to use it?" Jung asked.

Bickermann nodded. "Yes."

"Put it away," Jung said. "He is not expecting us to be armed."

Bickermann dropped the weapon into the side pocket of his suit. He felt more bewildered than ever before. There was a sound outside and the door opened abruptly. Jung stood up, smiling. Bickermann rose too, moving away from the overstuffed armchair with its chintzy floral covers.

"My dear Albrecht!" Hitler embraced Jung warmly, then pumped his hand. "How good to see you. How very good to see you. And so rude of me to keep you waiting. The reichsmarschall, you know —" He turned his hands upwards in a curiously Semitic gesture to show Goering's foibles sometimes kept men from more important things. "And this must be Herr von Bonhoeffer." He turned towards Bickermann, smiling, hand outstretched. Bickermann took the Luger from his pocket and calmly shot him four times in the face.

FIVE

Jung activated the communicator and tuned it to the shifting planes of his superior's basic pattern. At the same time, he released the personality imprint and flowed back to his own primeval form. "The mission has been accomplished," he said. He sensed the communicator waves carrying the message to their base station beyond the Uranian orbit.

"The Fuhrer is unharmed?" The voice of his superior.

"Shocked, but unharmed. The primitive handgun exploded pellets of dye on his face."

"He has learned his lesson?"

It was strange, Jung thought, how delicate one had to be in dealing with a primitive, alien culture, especially one led by a man of such unstable equilibrium. No show of power could have convinced Hitler of their abilities quite

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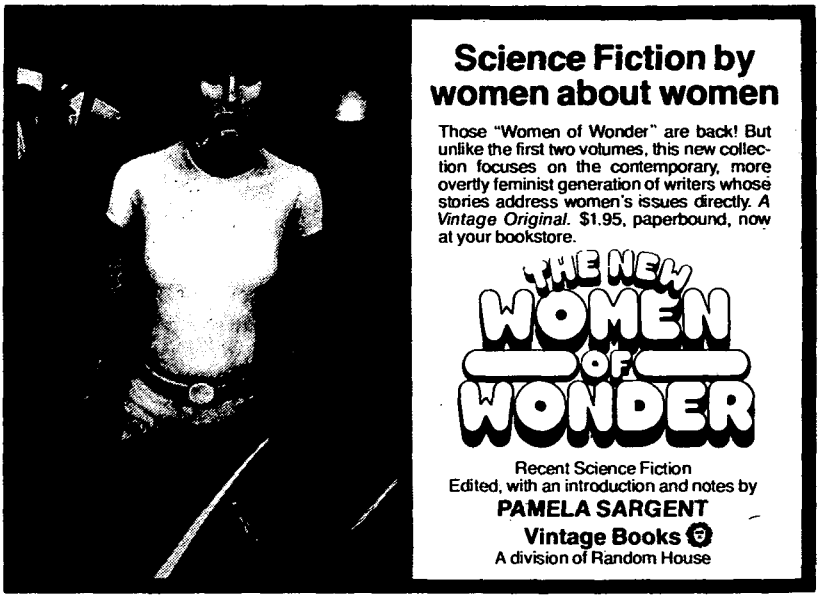
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so well as that simple charade. One might have dimmed the sun, but it would not have carried the same impact as the fact of an armed Jewish assassin spirited into the middle of his mountain lair.

"He has learned his lesson," Jung said. "He will begin the war as ordered." His days within the confines of a personality imprint had made him philosophical. Briefly he explored the master plan for humanity that began with the war. It had elegance and drama — a work of high art.

"Thank you for your own cooperation," his superior said warmly. "It should not be necessary for us to interfere directly again."

Jung felt satisfaction. He shut off the communicator and waited for the carrier beam which would transport him back to the ship.

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Sometimes when I'm reading an sf novel, I play a kind of game with the thing. Disregarding the ostensible date of the narrative, which of course may be anywhen at all, I try to estimate the *real decade* in which the story is set. This *real decade* will be the period most closely reflected by the book's characters in their feelings about the proper relationship between the sexes, for instance, or about the threat of international communism, or about how great an economic sway should be exercised (across the galaxy) by entrepreneurial capitalism, or about the inevitability of man's victory over the stars in their courses. No book whose argument assimilates progress and mastery over aliens can be really set after the Viet Nam War, for example. It is of course a fundamental rule of this game that no sf novel (nor anything at all in our world) can *actually* be set in the future, and that the closer a book gets to the real present the harder it was to write, to read, to understand, and to appreciate, rather as though the present were analogous to the speed of light. And it is a fundamental read-out of the game that sf novels tend to be much further into the real past than most "mainstream" non-generic novels. After all, sf *is* generic writing, composed, marketed and read according to laid-

JOHN CLUTE

Books

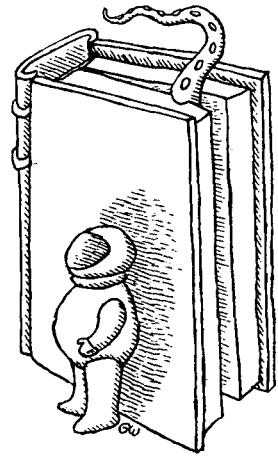
The Ophiuchi Hotline by John Varley, The Dial Press/James Wade, $8.95

The Incandescent Ones by Fred Hoyle and Geoffrey Hoyle, Harpers, $7.95

Cloudcry by Sydney J. Van Scyoc, Berkley/Putnams, $7.95

Souls in Metal, edited by Mike Ashley, St. Martin's Press, $6.95

Strangeness, edited by Thomas M Disch and Charles Naylor, Scribners, $8.95



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down expectations regarding form and content. Generic writing tends to resist innovation; absolute generic writing avoids innovation absolutely. Through the infinite universes of tomorrow of sf gape the fixed stigmata of the genre's last assimilated novelty — Heinlein's, or Asimov's, or Dick's, or Delany's.

Or Varley's.

A comparatively new writer, John Varley has already been compared to Robert A. Heinlein; like Heinlein in his early stories, Varley in his first novel, *The Ophiuchi Hotline*, abruptly updates the sf genre's treatment of its material, and like Heinlein in his time he does it without seeming to revolt against the field in which he's working, or the readership he makes no sign of holding in contempt. In no way does *The Ophiuchi Hotline* transcend its origins, the way Thomas M. Disch's novels do, for instance; if Varley's novel is revolutionary, it's a palace revolution. In fact, most of the themes it deals with are common fodder to most writers working in the Seventies, whatever the *real decade* of the books they turn out. There is a good deal about the moral and practical entailments of cloning, for instance. There are two sets of aliens with whom humanity must somehow deal: the Invaders who have banned man from Earth; and the humanoids who have been secretly operating the Ophiuchi Hotline itself, a sort of information service beamed in from beyond Pluto somewhere. There is a Nivenesque elaboration of Inner Planet-Asteroid Belt conflict in lifestyles and politics, and a Haldemanesque garnishing of excerpts from relevant documents, letters, reports and the like. As the Invaders have given man the boot for the sake of all Earthly cetaceans and now inhabit Jupiter, there is some routine mysticism about the fifth planet, along with gassy speculations as to the Natuare of Intelligence. There is a great deal of extremely casual sex, much of it unfortunately recounted in that tone of detumescent fellowship so popular with the current crop of writers. As human opposition to the Invaders is controlled by a man named Boss Tweed, there is plenty of sf's rote cynicism about civilian politicians, too. Taken out of context, nothing in *The Ophiuchi Hotline* sounds like anything much more than more of the same (garnished).

Put into the frame of the storyline itself, however, these cliches begin to look a bit different, and the book begins to show its worth. Having been exiled from Earth, mankind now lives in artificial warrens in the Moon, Mars, and anywhere else possible in the wainscotting of the solar system, which is routine enough, except for one

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catch: As the novel begins, man has been in exile for 500 years, and as we continue to read, we begin to see — with a series of curious shocks of recognition — how thoroughly he has adjusted to his new "urban" existence amongst his life support systems in his fluorescent tunnels. Nor is that all: Well before the end of the book, it becomes clear to us that man's exile is permanent, that he will never be permitted to return to his native habitat. The 500 years of exile have been deeply traumatic, of course, but the trauma has been healed, with the aid of the Hotline, which for centuries has been disseminating the scientific and technological data necessary to make human life palatable in its enforced hidey-holes; *Homo sapiens* has adjusted to its new econiche.

The book's protagonist is a woman (and it is another element of novelty that she is used as protagonist without any excuse-making auctorial comment), a geneticist who as the story begins has been condemned to genuine death for illicit experimentation in human genes. She's taken the illegal precaution of cloning herself, however, as has Boss Tweed's revanchist conspiracy, which needs her technical skills; one of Tweed's clones of Lilo is therefore substituted for her, and executed in her stead. Cloning is a double operation, however: The body is sf's usual Hollywoody one-sac identical, but the mind is a topological read-out of the original's as of a certain date, and when needed is remapped onto an awakened body. The catch is that this new Lilo is as fully a human being as the original Lilo, and just as desperate to stay alive. The clone Lilo's execution in the first pages of the book is therefore savage and moving. And when Lilo "herself" baulks at Boss Tweed's incarceration of her for his own dangerously quixotic ends, she too is killed off and replaced by a clone. This clone also rebels. The Lilo who eventually gives in and with whom we spend most of the rest of the book is several Lilos removed from the Lilo we began with. Nor is that all: The original Lilo's own surreptitious clone, subjectively younger than any other Lilos, is also activated in the Asteroid Belt, and a third active Lilo-protagonist is created when the "main" Lilo falls into Jupiter to a presumed death — though in fact one of the mysterious Invaders translates her to Earth, where a few humans are allowed to survive without technology, and begins to age there away from youth-maintaining drugs. Each of the three Lilos takes on protagony in turn by a series of deadpan, curiously shocking transitions — we're used to a more liberal, individualizing, perhaps more archaic treatment of human identity than

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Varley allows us, one of the ways in which he is genuinely modern, of course. More broadly shocking, however, are the reactions of those who know these various Lilos to her abrupt rebirths and her ignorance of events and relationships more recent than the mapping which made her possible. Most everyone has sex — it is called copping — with everyone else, but because Varley's is a different world from what we have learned to expect in sf writing, abrupt terminations and transitions of relationships are neither surprising to his novel's characters, *nor are they dehumanizing.* Cloning and copping and living in tunnels in permanent exile and breathing stale air and using the Ophiuchi Hotline are *not* innovations for the characters of this book. Time and again their calm acceptance of an environment radically (if at times unconvincingly) different from our own expectations brings home the novelty of the book in the sf world, and its author's resemblance to the early Heinlein, because both authors create characters integrated with the environments they are described as living in so very competently. If Heinlein's Future History is a series of rewritings of 1935, then Varley's deracinated urban exile from irrecoverable roots reflects the 1970s through the dance of cliches of genre, likewise.

The story's close underlines the depths of sorrow we seem to feel in 1977 about the world we have lost. *Homo sapiens* turns out to have a very weak claim to the real estate it's mucked about on, and the second clause of the Invaders' eviction notice is about to become operative: We are now due to be booted from the solar system itself, and to become, like the Ophiuchi humanoids, homeless interstellar wanderers: Fieldmice. Self-recognition causes vertigo. Because the book is a genuine piece of generic sf, the three Lilos do undergo, all the same, a vaguely Kubrickian epiphanous self-recognition routine, come to easy new understandings about themselves and mankind, and prepare to face the stars together, as cheery as Podkayne. But the taste of exile remains. It is certainly 1977.

The Fred Hoyle Band sticks to the old faith, however, presenting us with a new chase caper, *The Incandescent Ones,* whose *real decade* can't extend much past 1950. Though alien humanoids have landed with offers of cheap power and technological assistance, and despite the fact that 200 years have passed since they did so, the world of this novel is still wracked by Cold War conflicts, cars and trucks have changed not a whit and still use petroleum-base fuels, and

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young Peter, an American exchange student in Moscow, undertakes an undercover mission for the American secret service (or so he thinks) with no more fear of consequences than Dave Dawson ever showed. The chase extends to Turkey, where he's meant to deliver an alien super-battery. En route he finds out with total aplomb that he's not human at all but one of the monitoring humanoids; this impassivity is eventually explained, in the book's one coup, by the fact that he and all the humanoids are actually robots, created by the mysterious incandescent ones who live — guess where — on Jupiter, the In Planet. That Peter's a robot seems to be a comment on the requirements of this form of paranoid space opera, as witness most Keith Laumer protagonists — but there's no evidence the comment is deliberate. Young Peter (an expert skier) soon finds himself slaloming across the electromagnetically - enhanced reefs of space surrounding Thus Spake Zarathustra, and the novel closes with his arrival at the residence of the incandescent ones, who absorb him into their "vastly greater awareness." The book reads like a recounted dream, and its changes of venue and perspective are dream-like — it's only too bad that its crew of authors and Barbara Hoyle (who edited) couldn't spare a few pages to dwell on their creation.

Sydney J. Van Scyoc's *Cloudcry* starts off with promise but soon flounders into a narrative impasse, where it remains for 150 morose alliteration-choked pages. Afflicted with an incurable, highly contagious disease, human Verrons and bird-descended Tiehl are marooned by the Authority on a quarantine planet, into the depths of which they soon plunge against orders to discover all sorts of ruined cities and at least three distinct species of intelligent being. How the Authority could have missed noticing all this garbage neither Verrons nor Tiehl (nor Van Scyoc) think to ask, enmiring themselves instead in a mesa city, Tiehl to revert to avian savagery and to dream of having wings again, Verrons (and an equally sick chum) to fall under the thrall of the energy-devouring flutes that reactivate the extinct flying people of the planet (making a sort of fourth species). Blowing these flutes turns Verrons (and his chum) into torpid idiots, and as it takes most of the book for them to discover the fact (and to get clear of the mesa city), *reading* about blowing these flutes turns the reader into something like jelly, too. True, Tiehl's reversion is graphic enough, as is Van Scyoc's comparison of his state with that of a planet-bound descendant of the flying people named Aleida. But the rest of the book is as exhausted as Verrons

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(and his chum) are. Eventually Aleida gets a jewel to fly by, and flies off, and Verrons (etc) find themselves cured of their incurable disease, and get off-planet as fast as they can, having come to their senses. Most readers will have used their exit visas long before.

Bad stories don't necessarily make a bad anthology if its editor is trying to make a point, nor can good stories save an awful one like Mike Ashley's atrocious little money-spinner which he calls *Souls in Metal* because it's about robots, and because (I guess) it would be hard work (not his forte) to find a robot story that *didn't* say something by commission or omission about robot consciousness, robot souls, robot compunction, robot um sense of humor .... Not one story in the collection could have required more than a modicum of research to uncover. There are warhorses by Asimov and Harrison, Leinster and Simak, Kuttner and Dick and de Camp. There's Lester del Rey's hilarious "Helen O'Loy" (1938), that famous crazy comedy romp complete with female robot who commits suttee when her human husband kicks the um bucket and many other wry ironies which the pre-war sf community apparently thought comprised a movingly sentimental description of the ideal female. But Mr. Ashley neither reads it as deliberately (or unconsciously) loony, or an offense to half his potential readership; he merely calls it "what is still considered the most important yet ... story about a female robot," and drops the hot potato. In general his editorial comments are among the most illiterate ever printed, with high-school syntax howlers and unintended neologisms breeding together (see page 36, line 13) like fruit flies in Hiroshima, nor on decipherment is what he says about his assemblage of stories even interestingly *false*. Maybe Mr. Ashley can't write book English, and maybe his publishers don't know what book English is; I think it's more likely, however, that in slamming together this jalopy of a book both editor and publisher were thinking of other things than mere quality of product — that neither of them were (as Mr. Ashley might put it) totally unbeknown to thoughts of the ensuant buck.

Utterly different is *Strangeness; A Collection of Curious Tales*, edited by Thomas M. Disch and Charles Naylor, latest of a series of anthologies beginning with *The Ruins of Earth*, each one of them expressing a sustained argument about the world, an argument buttressed in each case by a meticulous assembling of material, perhaps most obviously with this current

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offering, with stories running from Philip Jose Farmer's beautiful idea badly developed, "Sketches Among the Ruins of my Mind," through Graham Greene and Virginia Woolf and Thomas Mann (though his story is seriously disappointing) all the way back to Sarah Orne Jewett. The argument of *Strangeness* is hard to put, and Disch finds himself in some difficulty putting it. At the heart of Edgar Allan Poe's strange monomaniacal art — Disch seems to be saying, though locating this essence "in the blood-dark depths of the heart, or even deeper, in the soul" is simply and lugubriously to word-spin — lies a confluence and mutual refraction of soul and landscape, through the signs of which gape like stigmata not the tricks of genre but the etiology and arabesque lineaments of Kierkegaardian alienation in a world bereft of God; and the stories collected in *Strangeness* derive from the Poe of that reading. I suppose I find some difficulty in putting it too. Certainly the death of God marks a significant absence in most of these tales, for most of them are shaped as contemplations of the taste of the fate of being human in the Western world, and into the mirrors most of these stories construct stares a dreadful solitude. Shirley Jackson's contribution, and Joyce Carol Oates', M. John Harrison's and Pamela Zoline's, all inhabit a *real decade* long after the failure of the center to hold; they are stories in which our tools fail and our souls hallucinate and we are for the dark, and our efforts at surveying, as in Brian Aldiss' brilliant "Where the Lines Converge," only serve to demonstrate the essential wrongness of the human condition. So it's a pretty grim book, in its way. Little of it is sf, not much is fantasy; most of these stories are too *solitary* to permit genre trappings, which assume a shared transparent world. Most of us read genre fiction to escape our solitude. *Strangeness* returns us to reality.

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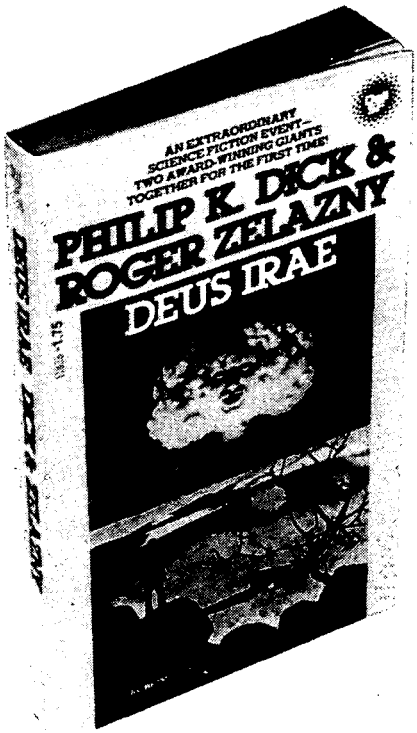
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Tom Reamy ("San Diego Lightfoot Sue," August 1975; "The Detweiler Boy," April 1977) returns with a gripping story that opens with a haunted house scenario and then turns into something quite different.

Insects In Amber

by TOM REAMY

The storm built in the southwest, turning the air to underwater blue, making the flat land look like the bottom of the sea. Lightning flickered in the approaching darkness and threw fleeting shimmers on the rolling clouds. Thunder that had been distant rumbles soon crackled across the Kansas prairie unhindered.

Tannie and I watched the spectacular display through the rear window of the new Buick station wagon. The rain followed us like a vague, miles-long curtain. It caught us in minutes and turned the late afternoon to night.

My father grunted and flipped on the lights and windshield wipers. He braked the station wagon carefully and hunched over the steering wheel peering into the downpour. Thunder crashed and rattled around us. The lightning flashes were so brilliant that they left a white streak floating before your eyes. The windshield wipers snicked away merrily, but futilely.

Tannie sat beside me bright-eyed with excitement. She was seven and had one of those inquisitive minds that drove certain adults up the wall.

We were starting out on one of those vacations the auto manufacturers, the motel owners, the resort owners, the tire companies, Howard Johnson's and the curio sellers on Route 66 like to promote. We had piled into the station wagon for three weeks of butt-numbing travel. We left Lubbock that morning (my father was an associate professor of English at Texas Tech) planning to go up through Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, over to Wyoming and Yellowstone, then back through Colorado and home. It wasn't the kind of vacation I would have initiated, though I didn't mind it that much.

I was fifteen, not too far from

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sixteen, and if given a guilt-free choice, I would have probably stayed in Lubbock to goof around with my friends. But since I had a special relationship with my family, the trip was no sacrifice.

We had planned to make it to Dodge City by nightfall, but the rain seemed to have put the kibosh on that. Dad was creeping along about twenty miles an hour, barely able to see the road. It went like that for a while until we came up behind a couple of other cars going even slower. We were behind a red Firebird with Arizona plates, and it was behind an old pickup truck. Dad didn't try to pass, and the Firebird seemed content to stay where it was too.

Mom squinted at an Exxon road map. "The next town is Hawley, but it looks pretty small," she said. "It's an open circle, which means ..." she shuffled the map, "ah ... under a thousand."

"Let's hope it's not too small to have a motel," Dad said, giving up on Dodge City.

"I don't care about a motel," Tannie chirped. "I just hope there's someplace to eat." She sat with her nose pressed against the window, fogging up the glass with her breath and then drawing pictures in it.

"Eat?" I laughed. "You've eaten enough today to kill a horse." I knew she really was hungry, but she liked me to tease her.

Tannie turned from the window and surveyed me coolly, but with a twinkle in her eye. I knew she was about to devastate me. She leaned back in the seat and crossed her arms. "There's a little too much sibling rivalry in this seat," she said with an ultra-ladylike air.

I groaned. She was always saying something like that. Mom and Dad laughed. I could see Tannie's mouth beginning to twitch. She wouldn't be able to hold that lofty expression very long.

"It's your own fault, Ben," Dad chuckled. "You should never have told her she was precocious."

"Yeah," Tannie grinned, "I looked it up."

"Uh-oh," Dad said. He stopped laughing and slowed the station wagon. I leaned on the back of the front seat and looked over Mom's shoulder. Wooden barricades with amber flashers were in the road ahead. Two cars were already stopped: a yellow Volkswagen and a dark, sedate sedan that may have been a Chevrolet. The pickup stopped behind the sedan, the Firebird stopped behind the pickup, and we stopped behind the Firebird. Everyone sat there for a bit in a neck-craning session; then a man in a raincoat got out of the passenger side of the VW.

He hurried around to the driver's side of the sedan, apparently intending to get in without

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comment, but the guy in the pickup stuck his head out the window and said something. The man in the raincoat hesitated, rather reluctantly, I thought, then came back to the pickup and stood there talking.

"Guess I'd better get out and see what's going on," Dad said with a resigned sigh.

"Charles, you're gonna get soaked."

Dad twisted around in the seat. "Ben, can you get to the umbrella back there?"

I got on my knees in the seat and dug around in the back among the suitcases, blankets, cardboard boxes full of who knows what, and all kinds of vacation gear. I finally found it and handed it to him. As Dad got out in the rain, a girl got out of the VW, also with an umbrella. They met at the pickup. Then a guy got out of the Firebird and joined them. It was turning into a convention.

They stood there in the pouring rain, all four of them, talking and waving their arms and pointing this way and that. Mostly it was the man from the sedan and the guy in the pickup. He was the smart one — he was in out of the rain. Then, after a while, they dispersed.

"We gotta take a detour," Dad said when he got back in.

"What's wrong?" Mom asked.

"Highway's under water up ahead."

"Could you see it?" Tannie perked up at the first sign of disaster.

"No. The girl in the VW said a highway patrolman in a yellow slicker told her the road was flooded. He stopped her, and then the old gentleman in the sedan came along. Seems they know each other."

"Did he say the detour was safe?" Mom asked, looking at the rain with a little frown.

"I don't know. The patrolman seems to have disappeared. The guy in the pickup lives around here. He said it was okay."

Tannie bounced in the seat. "Isn't this exciting?" she squeaked.

"You won't think so if we have to spend the night in the car stuck in the mud somewhere," I said.

Dad grimaced. "Hold that thought, Cheerful Charlie," he said and started the motor.

The sedan pulled around the VW and turned left onto a gravel road that cut off the highway at the barricades. The VW followed him, then the pickup, then the Firebird, and then us. Just like a camel caravan. The road wasn't bad, a little rough with lots of standing puddles.

I turned around in the seat and looked back at the highway, but I couldn't see the flashers anymore. We must have gone over a rise, although I hadn't noticed doing so.

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I also thought I saw the headlights of a car go by on the highway, but with the rain I wasn't sure. It must have been lightning.

Mom and Dad didn't talk. The farther we traveled from the highway, the darker it seemed to get. Mom watched the road nervously, and Dad kept his attention on his driving. Even Tannie was quiet for a change. She had her nose against the window again, trying to see by the frequent flashes of lightning. I don't know how far we had gone. It probably seemed farther than it was because we were moving so slowly.

Then I pressed my nose against the window and looked out. I don't know if it was coincidence or not, but it couldn't have been better if it had been staged by Alfred Hitchcock. There was a tremendous rattle of thunder and a flash of lightning that lingered for an unaccountably long time. I saw a house some fifty yards from the road on top of a low hill. It looked quite old, a big boxy shape with lots of tall chimneys and gables and a tower on one corner. The lightning faded slowly, and I turned my head to follow it, but the lightning wasn't repeated.

I turned as Dad braked the station wagon to a stop. The other cars in the caravan were stopped also, their brake-lights flicking on and off.

"You think somebody got stuck in the mud?" Tannie asked with a faint current of desire under the question. I think she would gladly be attacked by tigers just to find out what it was like.

"Let's hope not," Dad grunted.

Somebody up the row honked his horn. "Looks like they're calling another conference," I said.

"Looks like you're right." Dad pulled out the umbrella.

I leaned my arms on the back of the seat and watched them gather around the pickup truck again. Then the rain slacked, or something, and I could see by the headlights of the sedan a sheet of muddy water flowing across the road. Trash and debris swirled around on it; weeds and tree limbs.

After a bit they disbanded and Dad got back in, wrestling with the umbrella. "This road is flooded too," he said in a discouraged voice. "We'll have to turn around and go back."

"Doesn't look like there's room to turn around. You might get stuck in the ditch," Mom said matter-of-factly. She was worried but wouldn't show it; she didn't want to frighten Tannie and me.

"According to the guy in the pickup, we just passed, quote, the Old Weatherly Place, unquote. We're supposed to back up and turn around in the drive."

"Yeah," I said, "I saw it.

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Looked like something out of a horror movie."

"Terrific," Dad groaned.

"I want to see!" Tannie squealed and scrambled on top of me, pasting her face against the damply cool window.

"Watch it!" I grunted. "You've got bony knees."

"Okay. Hold it down back there," Dad said, but he was smiling. He backed the car slowly, looking over his shoulder.

"Can you see where you're going?" Mom asked.

"Actually, no," he grimaced.

Dad had it the worst. The others could see by the headlights of the car behind them. Tannie and I had our noses against the window again, watching for the house. A flash of lightning came right on cue. Tannie let out a little sigh of appreciation.

Dad stopped the station wagon with a lurch. Brake lights flashed on sequentially down the row. Dad raised up in the seat and examined the drive critically with a little frown on his face. A culvert crossed the ditch of rushing water, though more water seemed to be going over the drive than under it. He looked at Mom. She looked at the water. Dad shrugged, rippled a tatoo on the steering wheel with his fingernails, and pulled slowly in.

The front end had nosed in about three feet when it lurched suddenly sideways and slipped into the ditch.

"Are we stuck in the mud?" Tannie asked with cloying innocence.

"I wouldn't be at all surprised." Dad put the station wagon in reverse and tried to back out. The tires whined and the rear end slithered farther into the road. Dad cut the engine and settled back in the seat with a snort.

"Looks like it's time for another conference," I said when I saw the others converging on us.

"Don't be a wiseacre," he groaned. He grabbed the umbrella and got out. I scooted over to the other side and rolled down the window so I could hear.

"Sorry, folks," Dad said.

"Tough luck, Mr. Henderson." That was the guy from the Firebird. They had apparently introduced themselves at a previous conference.

The girl in the yellow Volkswagen was Ann Callahan. She was twenty and absolutely lovely. That was the first time I had had a good look at her. When I did I couldn't keep my eyes off her.

The old guy in the sedan was Professor Philip Weatherly. That's right: Weatherly, as in "the old Weatherly place." He was sixty, with a kindly but slightly befuddled expression. I also caught, inadvertently, a certain amount of nervous

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strain, but I didn't think much about it under the circumstances.

Carl Willingham was the driver of the pickup. He was about fifty, with a slightly protuberant beer belly and a cigar that he worried about in his mouth. He was wearing boots and a sweat-darkened Stetson. I think he had been sent over by central casting.

The guy from the Firebird was Poe McNeal. He was about twenty-five, with a cheerful face and a quick smile. He had a stocky muscular build and a pleasant, rather than handsome, face. I liked him immediately.

Ann Callahan and Carl Willingham went to the front of the car, as close as they could get without wading, and examined the mired wheels.

"It wasn't your fault, Mr. Henderson," she said with a voice that did funny things to me. "The pipe is clogged and the drive was badly undercut."

The others moved up to check on it. "Maybe we could put something under the wheels to give it some traction," Poe McNeal suggested.

"Won't do no good," Carl Willingham grunted. "Car's too heavy and in too deep. Have to get a tow truck." The brown water swirled around the bumper.

"Great," Dad said. "How do we do that?"

"I guess we could wait 'till another car comes along and send them," Poe said without much conviction.

"How will they turn around?" Trust Dad to put his finger on it. "We may have three hundred cars piled up here before the night's over."

Poe grinned. "The tow truck drivers will love it."

"What about that house there?" Dad asked, squinting through the rain. A flash of lightning and a roll of thunder punctuated his queston. Much too convenient; more like William Castle than Alfred Hitchcock.

"I noticed some chimneys. Maybe there's a fireplace where we can dry out and get warm." That was Ann.

Carl looked up the hill with displeasure. "Nobody lived in that house for fifty years. Like as not, it's about to fall down."

"Guess we could check it out," Poe said doubtfully. "Do you think the owner would mind a band of pilgrims taking refuge?"

Professor Weatherly spoke for the first time. "I suppose I'm the owner. You have my permission." His voice had a tenseness in it, like somebody with a pat hand.

Carl's frown grew deeper. "Don't know that I'd fancy spending the night in that house."

"Don't tell me it's haunted!"

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Poe cried with suppressed excitement.

"Don't rightly know," Carl answered with no trace of humor, "though I've heard folks talk."

The professor looked at Carl with a little frown, as if he'd misread one of his cards.

"I'll get a flashlight," Dad said and opened the door of the station wagon. He leaned in, trying to keep himself covered with the umbrella. "Ben, hand me the flashlight." He looked at Mom. "We're gonna check out that house to see if it's fit to spend the night in." Mom nodded and looked through the darkness, trying to see it.

I dug the flashlight out from behind the seat. "May I go with you?"

"No, you can't. If it's not fit, there's no point in your getting wet."

"Heck!" I said.

"Heck, yourself." Then he grinned. "Come on."

I got another umbrella from the back seat cornucopia and scrambled out. Poe was leaning in the window of the Firebird telling the other people what was happening. Then we all traipsed up the hill to the house.

With the darkness and the rain and trying to see where we were putting our feet, none of us really paid much attention to the house until we made it to the old-fashioned porch around three sides. Once out of the rain, we looked about without saying anything. The house was a little weather-beaten and badly needed paint, but it wasn't what one would call dilapidated. A few pieces of gingerbread were missing from around the top of the porch, and a few boards squeaked when stepped on, but I've seen people living in a lot worse.

Dad looked at the others and opened the wide front door with a fanlight over it. He shined the flashlight around, and the rest of us crowded in behind him. My arm bumped Ann's. She smiled at me. It was just one of those friendly but noncommittal smiles you give to strangers, but I felt my face getting warm.

We were in a large entry hall — I finally noticed. A wide stairway ascended to a second floor landing at the rear. We looked at each other with no small amount of bewilderment. Everything was clean and free of dust. The carpet running down the middle of the hall and up the stairs was faded but in good condition. The lace curtains over the windows on either side of the door, though somewhat yellowed with age, were clean. A tall grandfather's clock at the top of the stairs suddenly rattled and struck six times. We all stared at it, hardly breathing, until it finished.

"When does Vincent Price ar-

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rive?" Poe muttered.

"What?" Ann said, turning her head suddenly toward him.

"Nothing," he grinned.

Dad looked at Carl. "Are you sure this has been empty for fifty years?"

He shrugged stoically. "Always thought it was. Musta been wrong."

We wandered into the living room (though I imagine it was called a parlor in its day) which opened to the left off the entry hall. "If this belongs to you, Professor," Ann said softly, "you should know if anyone's been living here."

He was genuinely confused. "Mr. Willingham's right. No one *has* lived here for fifty years. When I was last here, thirty-five years ago, I hired a man to look after the place. Apparently he's doing his job very well."

The living room/parlor was completely and neatly furnished in that blocky, ungainly style of the early twenties. Even so, it didn't actually look as if someone lived there; more like a display; the Sunday parlor kept spotlessly unused for company that never came.

"There's wood for the fireplace," Dad brightened. "I was afraid we might have to burn the furniture."

Poe wrinkled his nose. "Wouldn't hurt."

The professor came out of his mood. "Why don't you get the others from the cars and whatever else you might need while Mr. Willingham and I get a fire going?"

So, we re-entered the downpour and slogged back to the cars. Ann smiled at me as we went down the porch steps. I missed one with my foot and had to grab the railing. Damnation!

When we returned with the suitcases, blankets, and everything else we could carry, Weatherly and Carl had a crackling fire going. That and the half dozen kerosene lamps scattered around the room made it almost cheerful. We all trooped in, bustling around, shedding raincoats and umbrellas, and looking around tentatively. Everyone was happily excited and seemed to regard the whole thing as an adventure.

"This is terrific," Linda McNeal said with delight. "I was expecting spiders and rats." Poe's wife was twenty-two, blonde, pink and pretty — and very pregnant. Poe helped with her raincoat. I liked Linda as much as I did Poe.

"Either that, or some farmer would be using it to store hay." That was Judson Bradley Ledbetter, known professionally as Jud Bradley — he thought Ledbetter sounded a bit too hayseed. It was easy enough to tell he was Linda's brother. He was also blond, pink, and pretty, but with a dark undercurrent missing in Linda. I thought

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he was a bit overdressed and had obviously swiped his shoes from Carmen Miranda.

"Where are the ghosts?" Tannie asked, ready to get down to business.

"They don't show up 'till midnight," I said with a straight face.

"Stop it, Ben," Mom said. "You know she believes everything you tell her."

"You okay, hon?" Poe said to his wife. "You oughtn't to catch cold."

"You're the one who looks like you've been swimming with your clothes on."

He grinned. "I was expecting Fred MacMurray to paddle by in a rowboat."

"The Rains of Ranchipur!" Linda cried gleefully.

"Right!"

Mom wasn't one to let things go untended. "I have some towels in the suitcases," she said and fished out several. She handed one to Linda.

"Thank you," Linda smiled. "Just my hair and feet are wet."

"Is this your first?" Mom asked.

"Yes. It's all sorta terrific, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," Mom laughed. "I felt the same way when I had my two. Here, sit by the fire and take off your shoes." She and Poe pushed one of the chairs closer to the fire and fussed over Linda. Then she gave Tannie and me each a towel with instructions to dry everything that was wet.

Mom was in high gear now that she had something to do. I guess that's one of the reasons she made such a good faculty wife. There are a lot of women who can't hack it. I've seen perfectly level-headed women go glassy-eyed at the thought of one more faculty tea; and assistant professors' wives seriously consider sticking their heads in the oven after being cut down by a *full* professor's wife — delicately and with no visible wounds, of course.

Mom says a faculty wife has to be one-quarter hostess, one-quarter scullery maid, one-quarter diplomat, one-quarter secret agent, and one hundred percent saint.

"If everyone is getting settled," the professor said in his role as reluctant leader of the castaways, "I'll get my suitcases. I also have some food."

"I'll go with you," Dad volunteered. "We have some coffee in the car."

"Thank you," Weatherly replied. "There's a stove in the kitchen but, I'm afraid, no hot water."

"Clare, will you put some water on?" Dad asked. "We'll be right back."

"Of course."

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They left and everyone was snuggling in quite comfortably. I got dry socks for myself and Tannie from the suitcase. Mom and Poe still hovered over Linda. Carl Willingham and Judson Bradley Ledbetter rotated themselves in front of the fire drying off. Jud soon gave it up and went into another room to put on dry clothes, after fussing around in several matched pieces of luggage.

"When is it due?" Mom asked, not quite having exhausted the topic of babies.

"Five weeks," Linda said.

"We were on our way to visit Linda's parents in Wichita before she got too big to travel." Poe smiled a proud and slightly mystified father-to-be smile. "We live in Flagstaff."

"Oh, Poe," Linda moaned. "They're gonna be so worried when we don't show up. We were supposed to be there by eight."

"I know, hon, but there's nothing we can do about it."

"Would you like a blanket?" Mom handed her one before she could answer.

"Thank you, Mrs. ..." She laughed. "I don't know your name."

"Clare Henderson. I guess that's the first thing we ought to do. That was my husband, Charles, who just went for coffee. My son, Ben, and my daughter, Tannie."

Everyone had the slightly nervous fidgets you get when you introduce yourself to strangers. Except me. I was looking at Ann Callahan just coming into the room from an exploration foray.

"My name is Tania Henderson," Tannie announced proudly. "After my grandmother."

"That's a terrific name," Ann said as she joined us.

"Thank you very much." Tannie smiled at her.

"You're welcome," Ann beamed back at her. "I'm Ann Callahan. From Albuquerque."

"Poe McNeal. I won't mention what the Poe is short for. My wife, Linda."

"That's my brother in there," Linda said, inclining her head toward the closed door, "Jud Ledbetter. He lives in Hollywood."

Mom raised her eyebrows questioningly. "Is he an actor? He's handsome enough to be."

Linda's mouth quivered with a suppressed grin. "He'll probably tell you he is," she said, "but he's a model. You may recognize the back of his head." The grin broke through and Poe chuckled. "He's been in a lot of commercials, but the camera is always on the girl's shiny hair or her gleaming white cavity-free bicuspids. All you ever see of Jud is the back of his head. If you'd like to hear a choice account of the doubtful ancestry of TV com-

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mercial producers and directors, bring the subject up." She and Poe both smothered laughter.

"Why are you laughing?" Mom asked in confusion. "He seems fortunate to me."

"Oh, he is," Poe controlled himself. "He makes money hand over fist — a lot more than I'll ever make. You see, Mrs. Henderson, Jud and Linda and I grew up together in Wichita. Jud and I were in the same grade. It's just hard for us to take him seriously. We know too much about him."

Poe plucked at his sodden clothes, unsticking the fabric from his skin. "If you'll excuse me, I'll follow my beautiful brother-in-law's example and put on some dry clothes." He rummaged around in a suitcase and followed Jud.

"I take it your husband and brother don't get on too well," Mom said.

"No, it isn't that," Linda said, hitching the blanket higher around her shoulders. "They've seen very little of each other since high school, and Jud's changed a lot since then. I think the term is: gone Hollywood. It's nothing serious. Jud's airs amuse Poe and Poe's amusement irritates Jud."

"Would you care to join me in the water-boiling detail?" Mom asked Ann, suddenly remembering.

"Sure," she said. They took a lamp and went in the direction opposite Jud and Poe.

"I wonder when they read the will," Poe said when they came back.

"Huh?" I asked, because my mind was still on Ann.

"In the movies," he explained, "when a bunch of people are gathered in a spooky old house like this, they generally read the will. But there's always the stipulation that they spend the night. And then the beneficiaries are murdered one by one."

"Poe," Linda frowned, "don't talk that way. You'll scare Tannie."

"Nothing scares her," I said.

"Does too!" Tannie asserted.

"Either that," Poe continued undaunted, "or they're lured there by a mysterious host, who then murders 'em one by one."

"*And Then There Were None* and *The Thirteenth Guest*," I supplied.

"Uh-oh," Linda laughed. "Poe's found a kindred spirit."

"Huh?" I said with another example of my brilliant repartee.

"Poe and Linda ask each other questions about old movies," Jud explained with no small amount of condescension. "If one can stump the other, he gets a point."

"It's a game we play on trips to pass the time," Poe said with a slight narrowing of his eyes.

"May I play?" I asked.

"Sure," Linda laughed. "I'm

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not much of a challenge."

"Be warned, young man," Poe grinned. "You are opposing a master."

"Okay, my turn," Linda said and looked studious. "Let's see. Ah ... how many times was Scarlett O'Hara married?"

Poe turned to me with mock exasperation. "You can see the kind of competition I have. You know the answer to that one?"

"Sure," I grinned, "three."

"No points for Linda," he crowed. She made a face at him. "All right," he continued, preparing a zinger, "what famous star of B westerns once played the romantic lead opposite Greta Garbo?" He settled back with a satisfied smirk.

Linda looked at him suspiciously. "You're making that up."

"No, I'm not," he laughed.

"Johnny Mack Brown," Jud muttered.

An expression of abject betrayal settled on Poe's face. "How did you know?" he groaned.

Jud raised his pale eyebrows. "You mean that's right? I just said the most unlikely name I could think of."

"I was gonna say Lash LaRue," Linda said with a straight face. We were all laughing when Dad and Professor Weatherly came back. The professor had a suitcase and a picnic hamper. Dad had a cardboard box with instant coffee, styrofoam cups, sugar, powdered cream, and a bunch of other stuff. We were helping them unpack it all when Mom and Ann returned looking smug.

"Water's on," Mom announced. "With a little native ingenuity, feminine intuition, and a lot of luck, we figured out how to work that antique kerosene stove."

"Professor," Ann said with a slight frown, "does your caretaker live here in the house? There's food in the kitchen. Not much, mostly canned stuff."

"I don't know, " he said with a befuddled look. "The man I hired lived in Hawley with his wife."

"Maybe some hobo has taken squatters' rights," Jud said.

"Wouldn't be nobody from around here," Carl said with assurance. "Folks in Hawley stay away from this place."

"You're here, Mr. Willingham," Mom pointed out. "Have you changed your mind about the place being haunted?"

"Never said it was haunted," he stated phlegmatically. "Just said folks talk."

What happened then is difficult to explain. Poe and I had gone back to Linda at the fireplace. I was sitting in a chair next to Linda while Poe sat on the floor with his arms around his knees. Everyone else was at a table about ten feet away unpacking the professor's

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picnic hamper. I was thinking that he surely had brought a lot of food for some reason.

I felt it coming before it hit me, but I was so startled I didn't do anything to protect myself.

There was an impact. Then pressure; pressure that knocked the breath out of me. If I'd been standing I think I would have fallen.

My head flopped back against the chair. It couldn't have lasted more than a second, but the residue of cold fear was overpowering. The sweet chill of fear, drenched, infused with icy sugar water.

My eyes closed and I shivered uncontrollably. My arms were so weak I couldn't lift them. I never knew so much fear.

But not my fear.

One eternal second and it was gone; the pressure and the presence gone as suddenly as it came.

I could hear what everyone was saying, their tiny voices far away; and I knew what everyone was doing, not seeing them with my eyes.

In that chill second Ann gasped and looked around quickly, seeking a source. Of what? Everyone stopped talking and looked at Ann; Professor Weatherly with more interest than I could explain.

Then Linda looked at me. "Mrs. Henderson!" she shouted. "Something's wrong with Ben!"

Everyone gathered around me except Jud and Carl. Ann was shaken. They helped her to a chair. Tannie stared at me with eyes like saucers. Mom and Dad knelt beside me. Mom put her hands on my clammy face.

"Darling, what's the matter?"

I tried to open my eyes, but my eyelids fluttered like moth wings, and I couldn't focus.

"Ben!" Dad said, strain and worry harsh in his voice. "Son, say something."

"Mom?" I whimpered. I wasn't ashamed of whimpering. I was thankful I didn't scream.

Mom put her arms around my shoulders and pulled me against her breast, holding me like I was two years old. Dad had his hand on the back of my head. I opened up all the way, let down all the barriers. I sopped up their love and concern and compassion. I bathed in it, swam in it, drowned in it. I let the warmth of it wash over me, let it drive out the chill of that fear.

"What is it, Ben? Are you ill?" Mom asked softly.

"Oh, Mom, it was so scared," I moaned against her shoulder.

"What was scared?" Dad asked in confusion.

My eyes focused on Ann over Mom's shoulder. She was staring at me, staring with surprised recognition. But she was no more surprised than I. Professor Weatherly was looking from Ann to me and back

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again like a startled owl. Then I saw everyone else was staring at me too, and I got a little embarrassed. I disengaged Mom's arms and leaned back in the chair because I wasn't sure I could stand up. But I didn't take my eyes off Ann.

"I don't know, Dad," I said, trying to answer his question. "Suddenly, I felt ... I felt ... it was like I had my breath knocked out ... and ... there was so much fear."

"That's what I felt ... only not so strongly," Ann said calmly.

Tannie slowly and tentatively took my hand in hers and looked at me with big round scared eyes. I grinned at her and winked. Her little face sort of exploded and she grinned back. Mom turned to Ann.

"Are you feeling better, Ann?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

Tannie suddenly perked up and piped, "It must have been the ghost." A little wave of nervous laughter rippled around the room.

"I think she's right," Poe grinned. "I've seen enough movies to know a haunted house."

"I've heard folks talk," Carl said with a nod of his head.

"You keep saying that," Jud grumbled. "Exactly what do folks talk *about?*"

"This house and what happened here fifty years ago."

"I knew it!" Poe cried and clapped his hands together sharply. "A house doesn't get a reputation for being haunted unless there's a story to go with it. What happened fifty years ago, a juicy murder?"

"First time I been in this place," Carl said, a little abashed at being the focus of attention. "Nobody I know's ever been inside. Seen it lots of times from the road. Used to be the main road before they built the highway."

"Well, what happened" Poe squirmed.

Professor Weatherly was distinctly uncomfortable and wished he were somewhere else.

"Happened before I was born, but I've heard folks talk," Carl continued, warming to his subject. "The Weatherlys lived here. Had a right nice farm, folks say. That was before the Depression. Man, wife, two girls, and a boy. Real well liked, I hear, though folks say there was something peculiar about the boy. One night folks livin' close by saw the house all lit up kinda funny. Lights dancin' all over it and flames in one of the upstairs rooms. Thought the place was burning and rushed over to help. When they got here, there was nothin'. No fire, nothin'. They called. Nobody answered. They went inside and looked all over. Didn't find nobody. Just found that upstairs room where the fire was. They say it was the boy's room. The inside was all burned, but the fire was cold out. Nobody ever saw the Weatherlys or

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heard tell of 'em since."

"Hey!" Poe exhaled slowly. "That's even better than a juicy murder."

"Didn't they ever find out what happened?" Dad asked.

"Nope," Carl shrugged. "Not that I ever heard."

"Professor?" Ann turned to him. "You told me when we were stopped on the highway you used to live around here. In this house?"

"Yes, for a time." He fidgeted, then changed the subject. "Do you suppose the water's boiling, Mrs. Henderson? I'm ready for a cup of coffee."

"Oops!" Mom laughed. "I forgot about the water." She looked questioningly at me and I nodded. She hurried from the room. Ann continued to look speculatively at the professor but decided to let it drop for the moment.

"You said there were people living close by," Poe said hopefully. "Maybe we could walk to one of them and phone for a tow truck."

"And my parents," Linda added.

Carl shook his head. "Ain't there no more. Not many small farms anymore. Reckon there's not another house for four, five miles."

"Forget I mentioned it," Poe grunted and settled back.

Mom returned with a steaming kettle and put it beside the coffee stuff. We made coffee and sandwiches from the copious picnic hamper and went back to the fireplace.

All of us except Carl; he was standing at the window looking through the rain toward the cars. He was more worried and nervous than the rest of us. Then he turned from the window and joined us. He was frowning and worrying his cigar to a frazzle.

"It's real funny," he said. "I've been kinda keepin' an eye on the road. Hasn't been another car along since we got here."

"Maybe the water went down," Jud said in a bored voice.

"Not likely," Dad frowned also. "It's still raining."

"The answer's very simple," Poe pronounced in mock gloom. "The ghosts lured us here for some diabolical reasons of their own and are now keeping everyone else away."

Professor Weatherly gave him a startled owl look. Well, well, the professor seemed to concur with that opinion. Linda laughed and shivered.

"Poe, stop! You're scaring *me* now."

"Not at all, young man." Weatherly rushed in to repair the breach. "Obviously, they've discovered the detour is also flooded and are turning the cars around."

Poe grimaced and laughed. "Spoilsport!"

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Ann picked up the kettle and looked at me. "I'll put on some more water," she said and left the room. I followed her, kicking myself for not getting her alone sooner.

The door to the kitchen was open. I leaned against the doorjamb and watched her fill the kettle from the hand pump. She had short dark hair — actually not much longer than mine. She was tall, with long, very good legs. With high heels she would be taller than I, but she was wearing sneakers, I was five-ten, but I hoped to make it to six feet in a couple of years. I know I didn't make a sound, and she had her back to me.

"Hello, Ben Henderson," she said without turning around.

The kitchen was dark and gloomy even though one of the kerosene lamps was burning. I had her alone and I didn't know what to say. So I pretended inerest in the lamp.

"It's a wonder people didn't go blind with no more light than these things make." I gritted my teeth.

"They probably did," she said and lit the burner under the kettle. Then she turned and looked at me. She had a faint, slightly impudent smile on her lips. I felt as if I were standing there stark naked. It came so suddenly and unexpectedly, I blushed like a virgin. Then I blushed because I was blushing. The sensation was so erotic, I had to do some fancy mental footwork to keep from really embarrassing myself.

She laughed, but there was only fondness in it. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to embarrass you. I only wanted to see if you could pick it up."

"Loud and clear," I said, fighting the tingle in the pit of my stomach.

"You're a very good-looking young man," she said matter-of-factly. "You should be used to it."

"It was a little different this time. You *knew* I was picking it up."

She leaned back against the kitchen cabinets. Her voice was wistful. "Don't you sometimes wish you were like everyone else? Do you get sick to death of always knowing?"

"Yeah. Sometimes."

"You're very lucky, you know. Your family loves you very much."

"You don't have a family, do you?"

"No. They were both killed when I was little. I was adopted by an aunt. Did you see that?"

"No, not really. I felt sadness and a sense of loss when you mentioned my family. It had to've been something like that."

"My aunt and uncle are very good to me, but, unlike you, there's no warm, comfortable glow into

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which I can retreat when things get a bit overwhelming."

So I did something I'd been wanting to do since I'd found out Ann was like me. She looked at me with pleased surprise. "Thank you, Ben," she said softly, like white velvet flowing over burnished gold.

"Think nothing of it. Warm, comfortable glows supplied on demand."

"You're an idiot," she chuckled.

"It was real, you know."

"Yes, of course, I know," she said simply. Then she laughed. "And watch it, I've picked up that one before."

"Sorry," I grinned. "Involuntary reflex. Besides, you started it."

"You're not a child to me, Ben." I had again that feel of white velvet.

"I know. It takes a little getting used to, I guess. I thought I was all alone."

"Seeing yourself as others see you is true with a vengeance in our case. I guess the worst part of it is so many things are boring."

"Like card games."

"And school. Did you skip a grade?"

"Yeah."

"Me, too. I'm in my last year of college."

"One more year of high school. What will you do when you finish?"

She shrugged. "I'll probably do postgrad work and get my doctorate in psychology." A smile. "That's one field we're very good in." I looked at her and she looked at me. It was good, so good. But we had a problem.

"What do you think Professor Weatherly is up to?"

She frowned. "I don't know. I have a feeling all this has been contrived somehow." I felt the same thing, but I didn't say so. She knew. "He's my psychology professor at the University of New Mexico. When I stopped at that roadblock and pulled in behind me, I was surprised, to say the least. He said he was on his way to Hawley, that he had lived near there as a child, that he owned some property and had come to settle some affairs." She looked around the room. "This seems to be the property and we seem to be enmeshed in his affairs."

"How did you happen to be here?"

She shrugged. "No reason in particular. After classes yesterday, I just decided to take a drive over the weekend. I don't know why. It seemed a good idea at the time, though I'm not so sure now." She looked at me and smiled. I felt the hum of violin strings. "No. It was a good idea." She lowered her eyes. "The water's boiling. We'd better go back."

She turned toward the stove

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with her back to me. "Ben? What you were thinking a moment ago. I didn't mind."

"I know," I said and took the kettle. She turned off the burner and looked at me. It never even occurred to me to blush.

On the way back to the parlor we found Tannie sitting on the bottom step of the stairway with one of the kerosene lamps beside her. She had her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands. She had that perplexed expression she would get when she ran up against something too complex for her to understand. She was obviously waiting for me to help her out.

"Tannie, what are you doing wandering around?" I asked.

"I wanted to see the burned room," she mumbled with her mind still on something else.

"Did you find it?" Ann asked.

"Yes, thank you," she said politely, then looked up at me with a little frown. "Ben, what do ghosts look like?"

"I don't know," I said and laughed because she was so serious. "I've never seen one."

She looked at her toes and absently scratched her leg. "I always thought they wore sheets, or that you could see right through them. Now, I think they look just like people."

"What did you see?" I asked seriously, because I knew she'd seen something.

"There was a lady in the burned room. She was about two hundred years old and wore funny clothes." She looked up at me again with a puzzled little squint. Tannie related all this to me very matter-of-factly, because she knew I never disbelieved her when she was telling the truth.

I put the kettle on the floor and sat beside her on the step. "What did the lady do?"

"Nothin'. She wouldn't talk to me."

I took her hand and stood up. "Come on back to the fire. Ann and I will go see."

Mom, Dad, Poe, and Linda were playing bridge. Carl was looking out the window again, and Jud was reading Rex Reed's *Conversations in the Raw*. Weatherly sat on the couch looking depressed.

"Mom," I said. "Tannie was exploring."

"What? I thought she was with you. Tannie, you know better than to wander off without telling us."

"Heck, Mom," Tannie sighed, expressing the triviality of her offense, "I was just talking to the ghost."

The reaction from Weatherly was so strong that I turned and looked at him. He was a severely startled man.

Mom smiled. "Sure you were."

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"I'll be back in a minute," I said, still watching the professor. "Ann and I are gonna look around."

"Okay. Be careful."

"Sure." I retrieved the lamp from where Tannie left it on the stairs. "Tannie was teling the truth," I said. "She saw somebody."

"Yes, I know," Ann smiled.

I smiled back at her because it was the easiest and most pleasant thing in the world to do. "I keep forgetting. Professor Weatherly is definitely keeping secrets from us."

"I know that too. He wasn't telling the exact truth when he said he lived here as a child."

"Didn't he?"

"That part's true. He did. But he was evading the issue somewhere. Didn't you pick it up?"

"I wasn't thinking about it. I seldom read people without a good reason. It's usually too discomfiting and embarrassing. I just sorta close them out like a background noise you get used to and don't hear unless you listen for it — or, unless it's very strong, like when Tannie mentioned the ghost. I picked up an extreme dose of surprise and confusion. I don't think the professor was expecting to find anyone here."

We checked out several upstairs rooms, all bedrooms, before we found the burned room. One door, which should have led to the tower if my memory of its position was correct, was locked. I raised my eyebrows questioningly at Ann. She shrugged. The burned room had been a bedroom as well. It looked as if no one had touched it since the fire fifty years ago. The furniture and walls were charred in places but only scorched in others, as if the fire had raged fiercely for a few minutes and then been instantly doused.

But there was no old lady with funny clothes.

When we got back downstairs, Tannie was facing the others defiantly, and near tears. She turned and ran to me. "Ben, would you please tell these people what I saw?" she said with a quiver in her voice.

I knelt and took her in my arms. She put her arms around my neck and valiantly kept from crying. "I'm sorry, honey," I said softly. "When we got there she was gone."

"Do you think I'm imagining things, too?" The quiver had grown more pronounced at the thought that I, too, might be against her.

"Of course not," I said firmly. "She really did see someone," I said to the others. I stood up, but Tannie kept a grip on my hand.

"How are you so sure?" Judson Bradley Ledbetter asked with a supercilious sneer.

"Has the ghost made an ap-

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pearance?" Poe asked with genuine interest.

"You'll have to ask Professor Weatherly about that," I said.

The professor frowned at me as if one of his own troops had turned on him. He fidgeted a bit and then sighed. "I can assure you there are no ghosts in this house," he snapped irritably. "However, you are due an explanation, as I see some of you are letting your imaginations run away with you. Before I explain anything, and I still can't tell you everything, I want to show you something." He went to the table where the bridge game had been abandoned.

"Why can't you tell us everything?" Dad asked, becoming a little bit irritable himself.

"You wouldn't believe me, Mr. Henderson," he sighed impatiently. "And there's no point in alarming you unnecessarily."

Poe grunted. "It's statements like that that alarm me unnecessarily."

"Mr. McNeal," Weatherly snapped, "there are no ghosts; you are in no danger. Please stop this wild speculation." Poe hunkered his head protectively between his shoulders and grinned at me. Ann and I cocked an eyebrow at each other. Weatherly was difficult. He was telling the truth, but I had a feeling it was only *technically* the truth. "Now, everyone," he continued and sat at the table, "gather around. Ben, you and two others sit down."

I sat opposite him, anxious to cooperate and find out what was going on. Ann stood behind me. Mom and Dad sat in the other chairs. Everyone else gathered around except Carl, who watched from the other side of the room. I had the impression he was staying close to the door, on the verge of bolting. Weatherly gathered up the cards and handed them to Mom. "Now, Mrs. Henderson, please shuffle the cards carefully and deal out four hands."

Mom gave him a quizzical frown but did as he asked. Weatherly picked up his cards and fanned them. The rest of us did the same. I had thirteen clubs neatly arranged in order, with the deuce on the left and the ace on the right.

"Now, Ben," Weatherly said, "tell us who has the winning hand if we were playing bridge."

"Dad," I said.

He nodded with satisfaction. "Correct," he said crisply and laid his cards face-up on the table. He had thirteen hearts. Mom had thirteen diamonds and Dad had thirteen spades. "Explain how you knew."

"I can't explain," I said with a frown. "It's like ... like explaining sight or sound or smell to someone lacking them. Dad knew he had the

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winning hand, and I ... felt ... sensed him knowing it."

"Did you know exactly which cards he had?" Weatherly asked intensely.

"No. But it wasn't hard to figure out when I saw mine."

"Read everyone in the room, Ben," he said like a wire stretched to the breaking point. He never took his eyes off mine. "Your parents."

"Concern. Love."

"Tannie."

"She's still mad."

"Poe."

"Interest. Wonder."

"Linda."

"Love. Incomprehension."

"Mr. Ledbetter."

"Disbelief. Annoyance."

"Mr. Willingham."

"Nervousness. Stoicism."

"Me."

"Determination." I narrowed my eyes a little, and he knew I read more than that, but I didn't say anything else.

"Ann."

I hesitated. How could I put Ann into words? I couldn't, and so I just grinned like a sap. Ann put her arm around my shoulder.

"Ben ..." Mom said in a tight little voice.

I hadn't really wanted my parents to find out like this, though my father had known subconsciously for quite some time. He'd never said anything; he hadn't wanted to upset Mom and didn't really want to believe it himself. Now they were both confused and frightened. I started to say something, to try to ease their worries, but Ann beat me to it.

"Don't you see, Clare?" she said quietly. "You and Charles think of Ben as an adolescent. So he acts the part to please you. It's difficult for us to be ourselves and not just the reflections of others. I went through the same thing. No one likes an uppity kid." She ran her fingernails through the hair on the back of my neck.

All I could do was grin and turn red. She hit me lightly on the back of the head.

"Ben ..." Mom said again.

"I know, Mom."

"So, there you are," Weatherly said, getting us back on the path of his purpose, whatever that was. "Ann could have told me the same things. They are both telepathic and empathic, though Ben is the more sensitive."

"Telepathic," Jud snorted and poured himself another cup of coffee.

"Don't worry, Jud," Ann assured him. "We can't read your thoughts, only your emotions, your state of mind, and the like."

"But I also knew who had the winning hand," Weatherly barreled ahead. "I knew where every card

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lay, because I controlled the deal. If I hadn't, I wouldn't have known any more than ... the man in the moon."

"I figured that," I said.

"How did you control the deal?" Dad had accepted everything completely.

"That, too, is difficult to explain," Weatherly sighed. "Ben and Ann are telepathic and empathic. My own ability is telekinesis, though I believe these days they are calling it 'psychokinesis.'"

There was a momentary silence. "What's that?" Linda asked wide-eyed. Poe had his arm around her and she leaned against him. Poe was quiet, absorbing everything.

"The ability to mentally control physical objects," Weatherly explained tersely.

"You mean mind over matter?" Linda breathed.

"Yes," he sighed, "I believe that is the popularized term."

Jud was pacing a short path on the faded carpet. "Let's see you make that shoe move," he snorted and pointed to Poe's still damp sneaker on the hearth.

Weatherly leaned back in the chair and tiredly ran his hand over his face. He broadcast resignation to the constant interruptions. He nodded and the shoe rose into the air. Mom and Linda gasped. Tannie was watching bug-eyed. Carl Willingham eased a little closer to the door. The shoe made a circle of the room and plopped back on the hearth.

"There's more to it than moving shoes about, Mr. Ledbetter," Weatherly explained impatiently. "Matter can also be controlled on a molecular level. Mrs. Henderson, lift the top card, please, and look at it."

She gave him a curious look and turned the card. It was the three of hearts.

"Turn it face-down again." Mom did so. "Now look at it." Mom exposed it once more. The hearts had been replaced by little yellow daisies. "It is now the three of daisies," Weatherly said without looking at it. "I could continue to perform carnival tricks until morning, but there are more important matters. There is something absolutely vital which I must do. I could not do it alone; not without the aid of a telepath. I have been searching for thirty-five years. I had just about given up hope. And then I found Ann. My dear, I must apologize for the way I maneuvered you here."

"Maneuvered?"

"Yes. I'm afraid it's turned into something of an imbroglio, however. I instigated your weekend drive by thinking it at you for the past two weeks. Naturally, you thought it your own idea. I created the rainstorm, the roadblock, and

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the flooded detour. Of course, I never intended the rest of you people to fall into my little charade. Yes," he sighed, "I seem to have botched it rather badly." He brightened. "But, actually, it has turned out rather well: If things had gone according to plan, I wouldn't have found Ben."

"I don't believe any of this!" Jud flopped onto the couch and stretched his long, fashionably sheathed legs in front of him. He looked away with a sour expression.

"Really, young man," Weatherly said in exasperation, "creating a rainstorm, a couple of wooden barricades, an animated yellow slicker, and a little water over the road, differs from controlling a deck of cards only in degree. It's exactly the same principle."

"If you can do all that," Dad said suspiciously, "you could've gotten my car out of the ditch."

"Most assuredly, Mr. Henderson. But, you see — and I must apologize — it was I who put your car *in* the ditch."

"Why?" Mom asked.

"Oh, dear, isn't it obvious?" Weatherly whined. "In order to keep Ann here, I was forced to keep all of you."

"Why did you go through all these elaborate machinations, Professor?" Ann asked seriously. "Why didn't you just ask me to help you?"

"I couldn't take the chance. If you had refused ... It was imperative that you come. I'm an old man, Ann. This is my last chance. If I'm unsuccessful again," his shoulders slumped, "then God help us."

Stunned silence spread over the room like a blanket and lay there. Then Ann spoke softly, "What is it you want me to do?"

"Please be patient with me, my dear." He sighed and ran his hand over his face again. His eyes were bleary from nervous strain, and his skin had developed a putty-colored pallor. I still didn't know what he was up to, but he didn't appear to be in condition to subdue an irritated kitten. "There are preparations that must be made before I explain fully. Imagine," he brightened, "after thirty-five years I find *two* telepaths."

"Just a minute," Dad said with a hardness in his voice I'd seldom heard before. "If Ann wants to help you with whatever you're doing, that's her affair, but Ben is not to be involved."

Weatherly's chin set firmly. He was about to argue, but Jud jumped up to pace again. He rubbed his hands on the fabric molding his hips and said with nervous volume, "I think you're all nuts! You're sitting around talking about telepathy, telekinesis, and created rainstorms and ... and ... as if you were talking about ... about the

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weather. All I've seen is a man, whose sanity I am beginning to doubt, do card tricks." He stopped and fixed Weatherly with a pale-blue glare.

"Jud, please," Linda whispered in embarrassment.

"Don't forget the shoe," Poe said brightly. Jud transferred the glare to his brother-in-law. Poe grinned and raised his eyebrows.

Jud turned back to the professor. "If you can do all this hocus-pocus, will you kindly turn off the rain, get Mr. Henderson's car out of the ditch, and let us get out of this freak show?" His voice rose a little in volume with each word.

Weatherly matched him decibel for decibel. "I am not a magician, Mr. Ledbetter. I can't snap my fingers and *turn off* the rain. It took two days of careful manipulation to create it in the first place. Besides," his voice lowered to conciliatory tones, "there is no point in your leaving. You have to spend the night somewhere. It might as well be here. There are very comfortable bedrooms upstairs. If any of you wish to retire, I'll show you the way."

Jud wasn't giving up so easily. "You mean we stay whether we like it or not? My parents are expecting us tonight, and I want to leave!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Ledbetter. Take my word. It is impossible."

Ann and I looked at each other. We had both caught the same thing. He was telling the truth as he saw it. It *was* impossible for us to leave — and not because of the weather. But neither of us could get the real reason.

"Take it easy, Jud," Poe said sensibly. "We're so late now a few more hours won't matter."

"Okay, okay," Jud shrugged elaborately and sat at the now empty table. He picked up the cards and shuffled them. "You go right ahead with your spook hunt. I shall sit right here and play solitaire all night. I don't care if twenty ghosts come traipsing through here rattling chains and moaning their heads off. I shall be totally oblivious to them." He dealt out a hand of solitaire and pointedly ignored us.

Everyone looked at him with some amusement for a moment. His shouting match with the professor had done quite a bit to break the tension in the air. Then Mom sort of shook her head and said, "I know one young lady who needs to go to bed."

"Do I have to?" Tannie groaned. "Things are much too interesting to go to bed."

"Yes, you do," Mom laughed.

She took one of the suitcases and led Tannie out. Tannie said goodnight to everyone, kissed Dad and me, then gave me a defeated look. I winked at her. They left and Tannie came back almost immed-

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iately. "Mom forgot the flashlight," she said. Dad was about to hand it to her when we heard Mom gasp and drop the suitcase. We all scrambled into the hall. Mom was standing at the foot of the stairs with her hand over her mouth, looking up. The suitcase lay on its side at her feet.

"I saw someone standing at the top of the stairs," she said with a controlled voice.

Dad pointed the flashlight at the top of the stairs and turned it on. There was no one there. The grandfather's clock suddenly rattled and struck eight o'clock. A startled squeak escaped from Linda. Dad moved the beam lower and caught a man descending toward us.

He was young, about the same age as Poe and Jud, dressed in rough clothes, with no expression on his dark, Slavic face. That's the way he appeared to my eyes. When I looked at him without using my eyes, he was a featureless shimmer. Dad kept the flashlight on him.

"It's Lester Gant," Carl Willingham said from behind us as if he were identifying a rabid dog.

The man reached the bottom of the stairs and stood looking at us, still with no expression. The clock stopped striking. For some reason, we all took a half step backward.

"You know him?" Weatherly asked, slipping back into the befuddlement he had only recently escaped. I had the impression he couldn't take very many more interruptions or complications.

"Is this the caretaker?" Dad asked.

"What?" Weatherly turned to him with a slight jerk of his head. "Of course not. That was thirty-five years ago. Wait, yes, the man's name was Gant. What was it? Horace? Homer?"

"Lester's father was Harold Gant," Carl supplied. "Is that it?"

"Possibly," the professor nodded and turned back to the dark young man. "Mr. Gant, is your father the caretaker I hired?"

"Old man Gant's been dead over ten years," Carl said. "Least ways, him and his wife disappeared."

"Ah," Poe widened his eyes, "more mysteries."

"You don't keep very close track of your caretakers, Professor," Dad grunted.

"What?" His head did another revolution. "Oh, the bank in Hawley handles all that. I suppose they gave the job to the boy when the father disappeared. Can't he talk, Mr. Willingham?"

"He can talk. Heard him myself," Carl stated.

And he did. Four words. I never heard him say anything else. "Missus will be down," he said in flat, colorless tones.

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"Who else is here?" Jud groaned.

Weatherly sighed. "I imagine he means my mother, Mr. Ledbetter."

"Your mother?" Mom squeaked. "Why didn't you tell us your mother was living here?"

"I wasn't sure that she was." Weatherly sounded on his last legs. "I didn't expect she would still be alive."

Gant turned without another word and vanished into the darkness at the top of the stairs. Weatherly looked as if he had been kicked in the stomach. He had had one complication too many. After a moment, Dad picked up Mom's suitcase and escorted her upstairs.

"You want to go to bed, hon?" Poe asked his wife. "You must be exhausted."

"If it's all the same to you," Linda laughed nervously, "I'll wait until you go. I couldn't sleep up there by myself."

Poe grinned and put his arm around her. They all drifted back to the parlor, but I gave Ann a signal and went out to the front porch. The rain had stopped. I could see stars in the west and a smudge of light where the moon hid behind clouds. Frogs were screaming in damp ecstasy, and a few bold crickets had emerged from their dry hidey-holes. The air had the fresh, clean smell it gets right after a rain, pointing up the slight mustiness of the house. I took a deep breath and leaned against the railing, looking at the cars on the road at the bottom of the hill.

"Did you see it?" I asked when I felt Ann behind me.

"Yes. I've run across it a few times before. Apparently some people have natural shields." She leaned on the railing beside me.

I turned when I heard the door open, but I knew who it was. Carl Willingham nodded to us and went down the porch steps.

"Where are you going, Mr. Willingham?" Ann asked politely.

He stopped and turned, looking up at us. "Leavin' ma'am. Rain's stopped and I'd rather walk four miles than stay in the same house with Lester Gant. I can take magicians and mind readers," he dipped his head, "no offense, and even flying shoes, but he's too much. I'd advise the rest of you to do the same."

"What's the matter with him?" I asked, because he was genuinely frightened.

"Folks say he killed his parents. Never found 'em, no proof he did it, but folks know just the same." He nodded again and started down the hill. We watched him for a moment.

"Folks around here sure say a lot," I observed wryly and we went back in the house. Weatherly was

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sitting on the couch deep in gloomy thought. I had the impression of swirling, muddy water. Poe, Linda, Jud, and Dad were starting another card game. "Mr. Willingham just left," I said, certainly not expecting the reaction I got.

Weatherly jumped up and stared at me. "Left? What do you mean?"

"He said he was gonna walk to town," I said, completely mystified.

Weatherly was severely agitated. He moved around as if he couldn't decide which direction was the right one. "He can't leave!" he wailed. "He'll be killed! Stop him! Bring him back by force if you have to! Hurry! Hurry!"

Weatherly's anxiety was so strong and sharp that I ran from the room and out the front door. They all followed me, confused and frightened. Carl was almost to the bottom of the hill. I yelled at him. Dad and Poe were right behind me, not knowing what was going on. The others stayed on the porch.

Carl turned and looked at us curiously. His eyebrows rose in bewilderment at the sight of us bounding down the hill, floundering in the slippery mud, yelling like madmen.

Carl, the only one looking toward the house, was the first to see it. His eyes got big. He took a step backward.

Then I felt it, like static electricity in my head. I skidded to a halt on the muddy ground and fell to my knees with a grunt. I looked back at the house. Weatherly was waving his arms and yelling. The crickets stopped singing.

The house was surrounded by a glow, an iridescent nimbus, like a soap bubble growing larger and larger. Dad and Poe had stopped, looking at the house. Weatherly was screaming, waving us back. My head was singing with the sweet chill of fear, but not my fear. The air crackled with energy. I could feel the hair on my arms standing up. Sparks danced across the hill, flowing down it like a faerie river. I turned to look at Carl.

He stared at the house, backing slowly away. The static electricity in the air made his clothes cling to his skin. Then he whirled and ran. The energy pressure was growing unbearable.

Then there was light, an eye-burning flash, a fierce discharge. All the energy floating free in the air gathered at one point. It circled around like a whirlwind of fireflies, swept by me, contracted, converged at one point.

On Carl.

He screamed. Then he was covered with fire. He screamed and ran and burned. He beat at his clothes with his hands, beat at flames with flames. His glowing feet kicked through the damp grass

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and left little curls of steam that sizzled and disappeared.

Carl stopped his useless flailing and just ran, his arms stretching before him, seeking. Then he stumbled, staggered a few steps, and fell, still screaming. He kept moving, trying to crawl.

The screaming stopped.

Then the movement.

Carl was nothing but a shapeless lump, burning, sending a shaft of black smoke into the night air. The energy and the pressure was gone. The crickets started up again.

I had thrown up my tattered barriers, trying to shut him out, trying to block his agonies from my mind. Then, I think I felt the muddy ground hit me in the face.

I was moving, floating in warmth. Dad was carrying me as he had when I was three and had fallen asleep. I tightened my grip around his neck. Then he was prying me loose, putting me on the couch.

They were all crowded around, looking at me, except Jud. He was staring out the window, pale and shaken. Tannie, in her pajamas, was round-eyed with wonder. Ann put her hand on my forehead and pushed the hair out of my eyes.

Dad was standing a few feet away watching me. I had never known him to be so angry. "Professor Weatherly," he said in a low voice, "you told me there was no danger. I want you to explain exactly what's going on. No evasions. No promises. We'd like to make a few decisions for ourselves."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Henderson," he said with honest regret. "It's too late for independent decisions. There is only one course open to us."

"Did you hear what I said? I. Want. An. Explanation."

"Of course, Mr. Henderson." He fluttered like a moth. "Give everyone a chance to calm down and I'll tell you all I know."

"Jud. Come away from the window," Linda said. Her voice was hoarse and trembled a little. Jud turned without comment and sat in a chair.

"So the spirits are malignant after all, Professor," Poe said quietly.

"Be patient a few minutes, please. Let's get Ben back on his feet." He looked down at me with real concern on his face. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yes. I think so." I took Ann's hand in mine and squeezed it. Tannie looked at me with her little face pinched and pale. I grinned and winked at her.

"I absolutely refuse to give you a hug, Benjamin Henderson," she stated uncategorically. "You had me scared to death. I thought I was gonna be a widow."

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Everyone laughed — more than it deserved, to be sure, but it broke the tension. Even Jud managed an anemic grin. Tannie sniffled. I sat up and held my arms out to her. She threw herself at me and sobbed on my chest.

"I'm sorry, honey," I said.

"Oh, Tannie!" Mom groaned, thankfully finding something practical on which to focus her attention. "Ben is covered with mud. You're getting it all over you." She extracted Tannie bodily. "Ben, go change your clothes and wash your face."

So I went to the suitcase and got clean blue jeans and a clean shirt. I was a bit wobble-kneed, but I tried not to show it. You can take just so much fussing. I went in a corner behind a chair and changed while they talked.

"Are you ready, Professor?" Dad asked, nearing the end of his patience.

"Yes, Mr. Henderson. Everyone get comfortable. I want to explain as well as I can what happened. Ben. Are you feeling it?"

"Yes."

"Describe it to me."

"There's really nothing to describe. It's just there. It's aware of us. And ... it's just ... there."

"That's right," Ann agreed.

"There's no hostility? No anger?" Weatherly asked as if he expected there would be.

"Not now," I answered. "It's frightened. I think it's always frightened. There was anger ... no, not anger ... panic, when Mr. Willingham tried to leave." I finished changing clothes and joined the group.

I was so busy concentrating on Weatherly, I didn't sense her presence. Neither did Ann. No one knew she was in the room until she spoke in her brassy bellow. "Philip!" she brayed. "What are these people doing in my house?"

Everyone turned quickly. I felt Weatherly's resolve become as fragile as cobwebs. She stood in the doorway, surveying us. She wore a long black dress that reached the floor. It had a high collar that pushed her flesh into wrinkles around her sharp chin. The long-sleeved dress was unadorned but for a large cameo at her throat. Her hands rested on a silver-headed stick and her pewter-colored hair was piled on top of her head. Her skin was almost white and had a peculiar sheen — like a waxworks figure come to life. Lester Gant lurked behind her ramrod-straight figure, as inscrutable as ever.

"I'm waiting for an answer, Philip."

"It's good to see you again, Mother." He sounded like a little boy who had been caught doing something naughty in the bathroom.

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"You're a fool, Philip," she stated in her clarion voice. "You've always been a fool."

"Yes, Mother, very good to see you again," he sighed.

She speared him with a look and sat regally in a chair near us. She moved as if her spine were of one piece. Gant remained in the doorway.

"You've come to try again, have you." It was a statement rather than a question. The rest of us sat there with our mouths open.

"Yes," he said. "I was about to explain to these people."

"It will kill you as it did the man just now. I knew you were fool enough to keep trying, but I didn't know you were so obsessed as to endanger others."

"They are not here by design, Mother."

"How long has it been since your last futility, Philip?"

"Thirty-five years."

"So long?" she said a little wistfully.

"Professor," Dad said through clenched teeth, "we're waiting."

"What?" He started as if he had forgotten the rest of us. "Yes. Excuse me, Mother." He turned away from her. "You heard how it began from Mr. Willingham. I was ten years old. It was in my room that fire was seen. I had for some time been aware of my powers, but I thought everyone had them. After almost disastrously finding out that wasn't the case, that I was unique, I kept them secret and practiced. However, as you heard Mr. Willingham say, I didn't do it in time to avoid getting a reputation in the area for being ... ah ... peculiar. My powers developed with practice, but I was so immature."

"You were a fool."

"Yes, Mother. It happened the night Mr. Willingham told you about. I unfortunately thought I knew all there was to know. You see, I had just read Wells' *The Time Machine*. I ... ah ... I'm afraid I attempted to travel in time." He looked at us with an ironic frown.

"Why?" Dad asked a bit dumfounded.

Weatherly shrugged. "I was ten years old and it seemed like an excellent idea."

"What happened?" Poe asked in rapt fascination.

"My powers were quite strong," he continued, "but my control wasn't. I didn't know at the time exactly what I had done, but I believe, now, that in some way I warped space. And something came through. It was ferocious. All fire and energy. It attacked me the same way it did Mr. Willingham. I tried to fight it but was successful only in saving myself. I ran out of the house and didn't return for fifteen years."

"He ran away and left his

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family to be destroyed."

"There was nothing I could do, Mother."

"Why did nothing happen to you, Mrs. Weatherly?" Dad asked.

Her head swiveled toward him. "I do not know why I was not destroyed, but I was not. It kept me like a souvenir. Like an insect in amber. I often wish I had been ... destroyed."

Dad inclined his head toward Lester Gant, still standing in the doorway regarding us impassively. "What about him?"

"Mr. Gant is in no danger," she said with a slightly upward twist of the corners of her thin mouth. "Mr. Gant comes and goes as he pleases. It knows he will return. Mr. Gant is a worshiper." I had the impression this was only a casual volley in an old war. Gant looked at her without expression.

"We were awakened by the commotion in Philip's room," Mrs. Weatherly picked up the story. "My husband and daughters reached it first. I saw them destroyed. I hid in the attic. When the neighbors searched the house, they didn't find me, and the thing didn't bother them. By the time I had recovered from my fright, it was too late. I was unable to leave."

"I returned fifteen years later. I was much stronger and completely in control."

"You should have seen the foolish expression on his face when he found me," his mother said with a slight pucker of her thin lips.

"You were here fifteen years?" Mom said in confusion. "How did you live?"

"Insects in amber require nothing," she answered flatly. "I do not eat. I do not sleep. I am not sure that I am even alive."

"The thing I brought here has no physical existence as we know it," the professor explained. "I think it sustains my mother with its own life energy."

"Is it the same for him?" Poe asked and indicated Lester Gant. I looked at Gant, still standing immobile in the doorway. His eyes were slightly narrowed and focused on Ann. I didn't think much about it at the time.

"Mr. Gant is here for other purposes," Mrs. Weatherly said with that tightening of her mouth which seemed to denote amusement. "Mr. Gant is here voluntarily. Mr. Gant has secret appetites."

Gant gave her a malevolent look and turned on his heels. She watched him leave, her porcelain eyes twinkling. She turned back to us. "Mr. Gant is blasphemed."

"What did you do when you came back?" Dad asked Weatherly, getting back on the subject.

"I'll tell you what the fool did," his mother brayed as Weatherly opened his mouth. "He tried to

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destroy it. But it had grown stronger also. And he ran again. Then, rather than letting the house fall down as it deserves, he hired Mr. Gant's father to keep it in repair."

"I did it for you, Mother. I couldn't ..." She stopped him with a snort.

"What happened to Mr. Gant's parents?" Ann asked.

"Mr. Gant and I talk of many things, but that is not one of them. They moved into the hosue when he was a baby. It didn't matter to me. I never left my room. When Mr. Gant was about that boy's age ..." she pointed a bony finger at me, "... the parents weren't here any more."

"What are you planning to do now, Professor?" Ann asked.

"My mistake was in trying to destroy it," he frowned. "I know now it probably can't be destroyed. But it must be stopped before it moves out of this house. I don't know why it's still here. I must communicate with it, find out what it wants. That's why I brought you, Ann, to communicate with it. You can't imagine the elation I felt when I found you. Thirty-five years ..." His voice faded.

"How did you spot me anyway?" she asked.

"Tests." He raised his forefinger. "That's why I became a professor of psychology, so I could test students. Tests of all kinds, to thousands of students. Most of them had been somewhat altered to my purposes rather than the original author's, of course."

"What will communication accomplish," I asked, "other than to satisfy your curiosity?"

"Isn't that enough?" His eyes widened. "But I expect to learn much more. Much more."

"If it can't be destroyed," I asked, "what do you plan to do?"

"I must warp space and send it back where it came from," he said.

His mother looked at him speculatively. "Perhaps you are no longer such a fool." Then she shook her head. "No. You could have done it without involving the girl. You are still a fool." She stood and walked imperially toward the door. She paused and turned, both her hands resting on the silver-headed stick. "Do not let Mr. Gant know what you are doing." Then she went out the door and up the stairs like a wraith to disappear in the darkness.

"Mom," Tannie said droopily, "could I go back to bed, please? I'm sleepy."

Mom put her hand on Tannie's head. "Maybe you'd better sleep down here, dear."

"Why?"

"Isn't she frightened of anything?" Jud groaned.

Tannie looked at him, surprised at his ignorance. "My brother is here."

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Jud grimaced and sighed. "I wish I had your confidence, kid. I really do."

"I guess we're as safe in bed as we are here," Poe said sensibly. "I'm ready myself."

I started for the door and Ann met me halfway there. I took her hand. We went back to the porch while the others bustled around preparing for bed. The sky had almost completely cleared. The night was bright out over the Kansas pasture land. I couldn't see Carl's body, if there was anything left to see. We sat on the railing.

"Ben," she said softly, "do you think we ought to be doing this? You know what happened to you when it killed Mr. Willingham."

"I've been working on that," I said and turned to face her. "Read me."

She concentrated for a moment, then looked at me in surprise. "You're completely shielded. I wouldn't even know you were there if I couldn't see you."

"When Mr. Willingham was killed" — the memory made my skin crawl — "I got the full blast. I've always had a shield of sorts. I don't pick up anything unless it's especially strong or I want to. Background babble doesn't get through at all. That's why I didn't spot you."

She nodded. "I wonder how many others there are, how many we've passed on the street and didn't recognize?"

"I've been trying to strengthen my shield," I continued. "It was relatively easy. It just never occurred to me to try. Here, concentrate on me. I'll let it down slowly. See how it works."

I showed her how it worked and she tried it. We practiced it for a while until she was as good at it as I was. She was quiet then, looking at me.

She stood up and stepped in front of me, facing me. She put her hands on either side of my neck. Tannie has nothing on me when it comes to looking wide-eyed.

"Ben ..." she said solemnly, "I know what you're feeling about what you can do. You've never explored it before, never really tried to extend the limits of your ability. I know you're strong, stronger than I. But ... be careful. Don't get in over your head with this thing. Don't get overconfident. Just ... be careful."

I nodded, understanding. We looked at each other, not reading, just being physical. Then I slid my hands up her arms and interlaced my fingers behind her neck. I pulled her head down to mine slowly. She didn't resist. I kissed her very lightly on the lips, still not reading, enjoying the purely physical sensation. She pulled her head back and smiled at me. I stood up

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and let my arms slip lower down her back. I felt hers do the same thing. I kissed her again, harder. She kissed back.

We were sitting on the steps, not doing anything, not talking, just being together, when I felt it. It was like a hobnail boot in the groin. Fear and pain, but mostly rage and anger. Ann got it too. She jerked and grunted and looked at me with pain. We jumped up and ran inside. I knew who it was. I did a quick survey of the house. Only one was missing.

I stuck my head in the parlor where the professor sat meditatively before the dying fire. "Where's Jud?"

He jumped at the sound of my voice and looked at me blankly. I repeated the question more insistently. "He's sharing a room with you," he said bewildered. "The second one on the right at the top of the stairs. What's the matter?" He rose and moved toward us.

"He's dead," I said over my shoulder as Ann and I ran up the stairs. We found him in the bathroom, on the floor, face down. He was wearing only gold jockey shorts. Blood was still seeping along the crevices between the white floor tiles. His blond fairness was now a pallor. Judson Bradley Ledbetter wasn't beautiful anymore. His shaving kit was scattered about as if he'd had it in his hands when attacked. I knelt beside him and turned him over. I shouldn't have. His chest and abdomen had been thoroughly worked over with a large-bladed knife.

Ann gasped and Weatherly let the air hiss out between his teeth. "Who could have done it?" he whispered.

"Gant."

"Why?"

"We don't know. Perhaps your mother does. She's in the hall."

She was standing there watching us, looking exactly as she had earlier. Poe opened the door across from us and stepped sleepily into the hall wearing pajama bottoms. "What's the commotion?" he asked, rubbing his face. Ann went to him and talked quietly. He looked frightened and hurried into the room we had come out of.

"Mrs. Weatherly," I said. "Jud Ledbetter has been killed." She turned her porcelain eyes on me but said nothing. "We've read everyone in the house except Gant. He's the only one who could've done it. We need to know why."

She narrowed her eyes at me and then turned to her son. "Your foolishness is catching up with you, Philip. Mr. Gant is also a fool. He killed the wrong one."

"What?" Weatherly gasped.

"Don't be an idiot," she snapped. "Mr. Gant is protecting the thing." She turned back to me.

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"Young man, Mr. Gant will undoubtedly discover his error." She wheeled and walked away into the darkness.

"Ben," Ann hissed. "He meant to kill you."

"I'm trying to remember what we said while he was in the room. He knows that you and someone else are here to help the professor get rid of it, but you were sitting next to Jud when he mentioned it. That means he'll be coming after you next."

"We've got to find him," Weatherly whined. "He could ruin everything."

I gave him a disgusted look, but he didn't really mean it the way it came out. "I'll wake Dad," I said. Poe came back into the hall looking a little sick. Ann and the professor went to him.

Mom and Dad were both asleep. Tannie was on a daybed screwed up like a worm the way she always slept. I put my hand on Dad's shoulder and his eyes popped open. He started to say something, but I put my finger to my lips and motioned him to come outside. He got out of bed, careful not to wake Mom, and put on his robe, looking at me questioningly.

In the hall we explained everything that had happened. "Do you think Linda and your mother will be safe?" Poe asked.

"Wake Linda and put her in with Mom. Ann, stay with them and bolt the door." She nodded.

Poe was worried. "Don't tell Linda what happened to Jud. Not yet." He went back in his room and closed the door.

"Professor," I said, "you know the house. Where could he be hiding?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. Lots of places. I suggest we start downstairs and work up to the attic. Ben, can you read him at all?"

"No."

We started in the cellar and searched every hidey-hole. He wasn't down there and he wasn't on the ground floor either. Dad had his flashlight, and I had one of the kerosene lamps so we could split up when necessary to prevent Gant from doubling back on us. Poe had a poker he took from the parlor fireplace. He grinned at me nervously and smacked it a couple of times in his palm.

We went back upstairs. Dad shined the flashlight down the hall. Gant was at the door of Mom's room crouched over the doorknob. He had a large butcher knife in his hand. He looked up at us and ran off in the opposite direction, through a door. When we got to it, it was locked.

"That's the stairway to the attic," Weatherly said.

Dad rattled the door a few

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times, frowning at it. It had one of those old mortise-type locks that could be locked from either side, but only with a key.

"Wait a moment," Weatherly muttered. The lock rattled and went *snick*. The door swung open about two inches with a lazy creak.

Dad glanced at Weatherly, then opened the door the rest of the way. He pointed the flashlight up the steep, narrow steps, but there was nothing except gloom and cobwebs. Dad took a deep breath and started up very cautiously. Poe was behind him with the poker, then the professor. I brought up the rear with the kerosene lamp.

The stairs entered the attic through a hole in the middle of the floor, a perfect place to get your head knocked off when you poked it up. Dad shined the flashlight around, keeping down as far as he could, ready to duck if Gant was waiting. When he motioned the rest of us up, I realized I'd been holding my breath.

The attic was a jumble of discards and had a fifty-year accumulation of dust. The floor was velvety smooth, disturbed only by Mr. Gant's footprints leading into the pile of rubble, and little stitchery-like marks made by crawling beetles. Dad followed Mr. Gant's footprints with the flashlight beam but we couldn't see him.

Twenty people could have been hiding in all the clutter. I held the lamp high, trying to see into the darkness. It was practically useless; it lit everything beautifully — for three feet in every direction. And when one of us moved, he cast a shadow the size of Godzilla.

The rafters were draped with dusty cobwebs and spotted with little brown mounds made by mud daubers. The flashlight passed over a wasp nest the size of a dinner plate back in the corner. The yellow jackets stirred sluggishly, lethargic in the cool night air.

Dad kept swinging the flashlight around, covering as much of the attic as he could, but Mr. Gant was as invisible to my eyes as he was to my mind. He could have been hiding in any one of many places.

I was about to suggest we lock the attic securely and leave Mr. Gant to the spiders, when something toppled behind me.

We whirled in that direction. The flashlight caught Mr. Gant charging straight at us with the butcher knife drawn back. The whole thing couldn't have taken more than a couple of seconds, but I suddenly had a sensation of slow-motion, of Gant running at me through a narrow aisle between stacks of cardboard boxes, of the knife glinting in the flashlight beam, of his shirt flaring out at each step.

I remember studying his face,

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remember feeling surprise that it was almost emotionless, surprise that he wasn't slavering like a madman. All of this must have been only in my mind because my muscles didn't correspond. I just stood there like a dummy, watching him.

Then he tripped. His toe caught in a picture frame leaning against the stack of boxes. A startled expression crossed his face as his body got ahead of his feet. Instead of getting me with the knife, he rammed into me bodily.

My arms went up and the lamp slipped smoothly from my fingers. I grunted as the wind was knocked out of me. Then Gant and I landed on the floor in a tangle, but the lamp stayed in my line of vision, arching up slowly, very slowly. The thin glass chimney hit a rafter and shattered, then the base, the wick still burning, smashed against a trunk engulfing one end of the attic in burning kerosene.

Mr. Gant lost no time in getting himself untangled; he had landed on top. I was flat on my back. The next thing I knew he was straddling my stomach with the knife drawn back. I twisted as he brought the knife down, and I heard it thunk into the floor beside my ear.

Then good old Poe swung the poker with both hands as if he were chopping wood. It caught Mr. Gant across the shoulders. He yelled and arched his back, his face twisting with pain. He lurched up, gasping for breath, and staggered into the darkness, the knife still in his hand. He upset several piles of uncertain junk, bringing them down with a clatter. Poe and Dad helped me up and I grinned thanks at Poe.

Mr. Gant was out of sight again, hidden by the darkness and the smoke. We turned to the fire. The whole end of the attic was burning furiously. The heat was rapidly becoming uncomfortable. We edged toward the stairs, but the professor was staring at the flames, deep in concentration. We stopped and watched.

A mist began forming in the attic, like heavy fog rolling in. It even smelled like fog. It grew thicker and thicker, closing in on the fire until, finally, it was completely obscured by the bank of white. The crackle of the flames gradually changed to a damp hissing and then nothing. I could no longer feel the heat. Little beads of water stood on the hairs on my arms, like a heavy dew. The thick mist swirled away as if in a wind and the fire was out. The end of the attic was blackened and charred, shiny with moisture. Drops of water fell from the rafters, thumping against the boxes and trunks and other debris. Weatherly sighed deeply.

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"You're sure handy to have around, Professor," Poe said with a certain amount of awe.

"Carnival tricks." He perished the thought.

Dad swung the flashlight away from the burned area and started to say something. He stopped with his mouth open, looking at something. We turned. Gant was creeping toward us with the knife in his hand. Mr. Gant may have had his faults, but lack of determination wasn't one of them. He stopped when the light hit him. His eyes glittered like marbles. Weatherly was concentrating again.

I heard a harsh buzzing, and the wasp nest almost directly over Gant's head erupted in a yellow and black storm. I don't know what Weatherly did, but the yellow jackets swarmed all over Gant. He screamed and stumbled back, crashing through a pile of discards, swatting at the stinging insects. He kept yelling and threshing, and I guess Weatherly couldn't go through with it any longer because the wasps left Gant and settled back on the nest.

Then, unbelievably, Gant rose from the junk and started toward us again. His face and hands were solid with welts that grew redder and larger by the second. One eye was almost closed, but he came at us, staggering and stumbling, entangling himself in the clutter. He warded off the collapsing debris with one hand and held the knife in the other.

Professor Weatherly groaned. Then the knife in Gant's hand glowed a cherry red. Gant sucked air through his teeth and dropped it, clutching his hand with the other. The knife clattered to the floor. A curl of smoke rose from it. But, before another fire could get started, Weatherly did something to it and it was cold once more.

Dad kept the flashlight on Gant. He backed away, still hunched over his burned hand. We moved toward him. His eye was now completely closed, and the other didn't look too good. He still hadn't given up. He grabbed the base of a piano stool with his good hand and drew back to throw it.

Then he froze. The piano stool slipped from limp fingers and bounced off a three-legged table. Gant sucked in air like a fish. He clutched at his chest. I looked at Weatherly, then back at Gant. He breathed in great, roaring gasps, tearing at his shirt. He dropped to one knee, then doubled up and fell sideways into a rusty birdcage. He didn't move. We went to him. He was unconscious but breathing evenly.

I looked at Weatherly. "You could have killed him."

"Yes."

"What do we do with him

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now?" Dad asked softly.

The professor didn't answer for a moment, then looked up. "The closet in the upstairs hall has a strong lock on it."

So, we wrestled Gant down the steep, narrow stairs and locked him in the empty closet. The lock didn't seem to me any stronger than any of the others, but it worked and wasn't loose. The door opened outward, but there wasn't enough room for Gant to get much of a run at battering it down. If he tried, we would hear him. We propped a chair under the knob just in case and stood there looking at each other.

"Now what?" Poe finally said, plucking stray cobwebs from the hair on his chest.

"Everyone should go back to bed. There's nothing more to be done," the professor said.

Dad brushed dust from his robe. "How long do you plan to wait before you attempt to send your monster back where it came from?"

Weatherly glanced at me, then looked morosely at Dad. "I don't know," he sighed. "Tomorrow, in the daylight, after everyone's rested ... I don't know." He glanced at me again. "We must make sure everything is right. I doubt if we'll have a second chance." He looked at the floor, then back at Dad. "I'm terribly sorry all of you were involved in this, Mr. Henderson. Mr. McNeal. Terribly sorry." He turned and walked slowly toward the stairs.

"Clare and Linda will be very curious about all this commotion," Dad observed.

"Don't tell Linda until in the morning ... about Jud," Poe said in a strained voice. "She needs sleep."

"Ann has already satisfied their curiosity," I explained.

We moved Jud's body downstairs to the dining room and covered it with a sheet. None of us could think of anything else to do. Then we went back to bed.

I don't know how long I'd been asleep. I'm not at my most lucid when suddenly awakened. I found myself sitting in the middle of the bed wondering what woke me. Then I knew.

I ran into the hall, barefooted and in my underwear. The closet door was wide open. I never found out how Gant got it open without waking someone. I should have known his determination wouldn't have been dampered by a simple locked door.

I burst into Ann's room without slowing and skidded to a halt. Gant had his arm around her throat so she couldn't cry out. They stood near the foot of the bed. Ann was fighting him but he was too strong for her. He had gone back to the attic for the knife and held it at her

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breast. His face and hands looked like raw hamburger. He didn't even look at me, though I imagine he could barely see. His good eye was almost swollen shut. But he was lost in some fantasy of his own, and I thought I could detect an expression of rapture on his swollen face. He wasn't holding Ann as a shield or a hostage, but as a sacrifice.

I stood petrified in the middle of the room as he drew back the knife. My face contorted in rage and hate and I screamed a silent mental scream. I don't know exactly what I did, and I've never tried to repeat it. I drew on something I hope never emerges again.

My mind raged at Gant, blasted him with primal hate. Synapses opened like floodgates. The knife froze in the air. My fingernails dug into my palms. My body trembled uncontrollably. Sweat popped out on my face. My eyes locked on his. The arm around Ann's neck fell away. The knife slipped from his upraised hand. He took a step backward, staring at me uncomprehendingly with his red slit of an eye, his mouth slack. Ann stumbled away from him and got behind me.

I didn't stop because Ann was free. The vision of the knife buried in her breast was too vivid. I could have rationalized it as the only way, but I wasn't thinking at the time; only hating.

Gant backed against the wall, but his legs kept moving, trying to get him farther away. His head jerked back and forth, as if he wanted to loosen something clinging to his face. He put his red, puffy hands over his ears and breathed through his mouth. A low moan began deep in his throat. The moan grew slowly in volume and pitch until it was a shrill keening, ending only when his lungs were empty.

I hammered at the bright mirror surrounding him, beat at it, battered against it until it shattered, and I plunged through into his mind.

I thought I screamed, but Ann said later it was a whimper.

I threw up my shields and fought my way out, ripping and tearing, clawing my way free, slashing through the bright chaos and blinding disorder of Gant's mind. As I broke free I felt his mind dim and go black.

I felt like jelly and slumped to my knees. I couldn't get my breath. My arms hung limp and immovable. Gant was in a crumpled heap against the wall. Ann was beside me, kneeling beside me, her arms around me, feeling me.

A heartbeat began.

Oh, Ben.

Yes. My God! Do you know what I did?

I felt it. Part of it reflected off his shield.

Are you all right? Did he hurt

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you?

No. I was only frightened. You came.

We can do it now.

No. Not now. Later.

Yes.

The heartbeat continued.

They're all still asleep.

Yes. I never thought it could be so ...

I know. I know.

I keep forgetting. Ann ...

I know. Don't be sad.

We've lost something. But we've gained more, so very much more.

The heartbeat ended.

I put my arm around her. She leaned her head against mine and we went to my room. I closed the door behind me and leaned against it, looking at her. She stepped toward me. I met her halfway. We kissed, melded in mind and body. We undressed and moved to the bed, touching and loving. It wasn't only physical love, but I wasn't reading her. It was no longer necessary.

I was me.

I was Ann.

We were us.

When the sun came up we got out of bed and dressed. I went to my parents' room. Ann went to Poe's and Linda's. "Dad. Mom," we said. "Poe. Linda," we said. "Wake up. Get dressed and ready to leave. Pack everything and go out on the porch."

"Ben?" Mom said.

"Ann?" Linda said.

"Everything's okay," we said. "We're ready to help the professor get rid of his monster. Hurry."

Ann and I met in the hall and went downstairs. Professor Weatherly was asleep on the couch, tired and gray, slipping into despair.

"Professor," we said with my voice.

"What?" He sat up suddenly, confused. "Oh. Ben. Is it morning?"

"Yes."

"We're ready," the Ann part of me said.

"What?" He stood up, rubbing his eyes.

"We're ready to help you exorcise your monster."

He looked at us. "Something has happened."

"Yes. Ann and I are telepathically linked. It's permanent."

"Describe it to me."

"I'm not sure I can. I know everything Ben's thinking; I remember; I feel everything he feels."

"But there's more than that," I said. "I'm both of us and we're one of us. We're ... well, essentially we're one person in two bodies. Yet we still retain our separate egos. Perhaps a better explanation would be we're two people cohabiting two bodies. I don't know how it would

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be with two men, or two women, but with us, it's ... it's love."

"Yes," he whispered. "Yes. It would have to be, wouldn't it? Total love or ... total loathing. There could be no other way."

"There's no way to really know what it's like without experiencing it," Ann said. "People who know only physical love are missing so much." We grinned. "Though, I guess there is something faintly masturbatory about it."

"This is absolutely marvelous." He beamed like a child on Christmas morning. "Will you allow me to study this further?"

We smiled at him. "Of course, Professor," I said. "As soon as the others are ready to leave, we can contact your monster. Your mother will not leave. Mr. Gant is dead."

"Dead?" He blinked.

"I killed him," I said. I locked my muscles to stop the trembling I could feel about to begin. "I willed him dead and he died," I said numbly.

Ann put her hand on my shoulder. "We're ready," she said. Vocalizing was slow and clumsy, but it was an old habit.

"Wait here," I told him and went to the entry hall. They came down the stairs with their suitcases and uncertain expressions, Linda crying, but trying to stop. Poe had told her about Jud. I herded them unresisting onto the porch. Mom and Dad turned and looked at me, frightened. I smiled. "Don't worry," I said. Tannie peeked back at me, saucer-eyed and solemn. I winked at her. She grinned and went on out. I closed the door and went back to the parlor.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes." Weatherly nodded.

"I hope what you find out justifies everything, Professor." We concentrated. A brilliant flash. A sheet of energy swirled around us, held away by the professor, and died out. "Take it easy," I said softly, "take it easy. It's almost insane with fright."

We touched that alien mind. Not entered, only touched. We would have been lost if we had entered. Its alienness was indescribable. There was no point of reference to human thought. We stared in awe at its great, shining, immature mind. Its alienness made details, even large details, impossible to grasp; but basic emotions, which must be common to all intelligent life, were clear to read. It was aware of our minds, but did not fear them. It feared only what was alien to *it*: Weatherly's *physical* assault.

A smile came involuntarily to our lips. "I'll be damned," I said aloud. "Do you know what we've got, Professor? It's a ... a baby, if that's the right word. Its memory goes back millions, billions of

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years; so far it can't remember its origin, but it knows it's immature. The reason it's never left this house is because it's basically a frightened child. It only wants to go home. Send it back, Professor, while I try to keep it calm.

Another flash and another swirl of energy. "It's too frightened," I said anxiously. "I'm having trouble. It wants to go home more than anything, but you'll have to force it. It's irrational with fear. It's only been here a moment by its time-scale."

Ann left to get the others to the cars, away from the house. I waited until they were at a safe distance.

"Now. Force it, Professor."

Energy whirled around us like a tornado. The walls, the ceilings, the floors, the furniture, all were burning fiercely, except for the bubble in which we stood.

Weatherly opened a path through the inferno, a path from us to the door. "Go with the others, Ben," he said. I started to protest, but he shut me up. "You can do just as much from outside as you can in here. And I can do more if I don't have you to worry about."

He was right. I had no protection from the thing's physical energy, energy which I suspected was manifesting itself physically because it was *here*, not where it came from. I ran through the tunnel he opened and turned at the door. The tunnel closed and I couldn't see him anymore.

I hurried down the hill to the others, still in contact with the professor's monster. The just-risen sun gleamed on the still damp house, turning the weathered gray to copper, but flames poured from the parlor windows. Smoke billowed from other openings, the gray clouds also gilded by the sun. Flames suddenly spurted from under the eaves. The fire had gotten upstairs. Energy popped like lightning bolts.

All this I saw with my eyes and heard with my ears. What I saw and heard with my mind was different.

I caught a thought from the professor's mother, but shut it out quickly, unable to bear it. The monster threshed in the professor's grip, frightened out of its mind, screaming pitifully.

I watched Professor Weatherly in the parlor but not with my eyes. He stood in a clear island surrounded by raging flames and energy. It began. The inferno cycloned away on one side of him and a tunnel opened, an endless, gleaming tunnel. He stood still, hunched in concentration.

I knew, suddenly, what was about to happen, but the professor was caught completely by surprise. There was nothing I could do to help him. I slammed shields around

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Ann. She jerked out of her trance and looked wildly about. She screamed at me, "No! Ben! Don't block me out!"

More energy popped. Everyone's clothing clung to their skin. I could feel my hair standing up, charged with static electricity. Helplessly I watched the professor force his monster into the tunnel.

He hadn't moved. He stood before the tunnel, surrounded by an inferno, hunched in concentration. Then, gradually, slowly, his body smudged outward, toward the tunnel. He felt it. He looked up. He strained away from the tunnel, held out his arms, warding it away. The distortion, the stretching outward continued. His arms were caught in it, extending to half again their former length, blurring toward the tunnel.

Then a particle of his little finger broke away and streamed down the tunnel like a shooting star. More particles broke free. The tunnel was filled with shooting stars, streaking to infinity.

I threw up my shield. Weatherly's terror was too great. But, in that last split second, I saw a comet roar away down the tunnel, and he was gone. The tunnel was closing.

I was aware of physical sensations only. I stood swaying, trying to keep from toppling over. Ann threw her arms around me. Dad put his hand on the back of my neck, not saying anything. I dropped the shields. Ann and I were one again.

"He did it," I said on an exhaustion high. "It's gone home. He sent it back. But it dragged him back with it. I was with him for a moment."

The energy was gone but the fire wasn't. The old wood of the house burned ferociously. Dad propelled us away, to the bottom of the hill, where the others waited numbly. We stood for a long time, saying nothing, watching the house burn.

Tannie had come to me and stood watching the house with her arm clutching my thigh. I had my arm on her shoulder. "What about you, Ann?" Dad asked.

"With me," I said.

"Yes," she smiled.

Tannie peeked around me, staring at Ann. Ann smiled at her and winked the same way I would. Tannie grinned like a supernova. She launched herself at Ann and hugged her.

The sheriff's car pulled up as we were about to leave. He was a nice person named Robin Walker. We told him a simplified version of what happened, a version he would believe. Ann and I made sure he believed it.

Dad backed the station wagon out of the ditch. I got in the yellow VW with Ann, and we went on to Wichita.

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"I'd say it's a pretty obvious case of evolution taking a wrong turn."

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SINBAD, STAY HOME!

The special effects creator Ray Harryhausen has quite a large cult following, consisting mostly of those people who refer to that field of endeavor with semantic snobbishness as Fx and sizeable enough to justify the publication of at least one book totally and several books partially devoted to his creations.

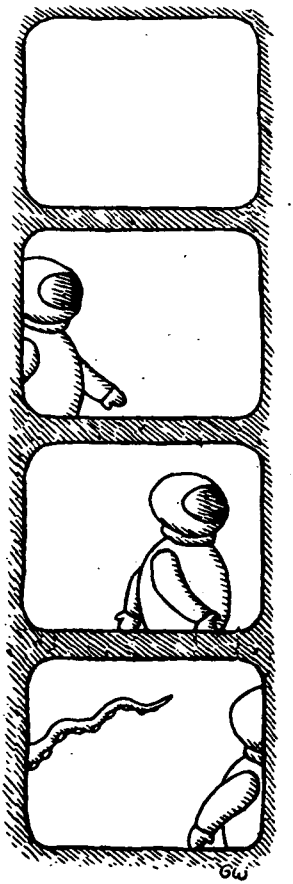
Now I am second to none in my admiration of Mr. Harryhausen's craft (and I emphasize the word *craft*), but special effects do not a movie in entirety make, and despite the fact that his talents went far toward making one extraordinary film — the delightful *Jason and the Argonauts* — I feel that as yet one more Sinbad movie falls off the assembly line that it might not be the best thing in the world for him to be producing and writing his own films.

I may be wrong, but I think it works something like this. Mr. H. makes up a list of the special effects he feels like playing with this time around. This list he presents to the other "writer" on the film, and together they work out a plot — or something that will pass for same — around these effects. The other writer fills in some necessary dialogue and voila! — a script.

The latest Sinbad epic certainly

BAIRD SEARLES

Films



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looks like it was done that way. Called *The Eye of the Tiger* — for no reason save that the eyes of the chief villainess go all feline when she's doing her nefarious magic — this one stars John Wayne's son, Pat, as the indefatigable voyager.

To get what passes for the plot over with, seems that a friend of Sinbad's has been turned into a baboon just before his coronation. The only person that can possibly help is a perhaps mythical magician who lives on a magical island surrounded by terrible reefs. Once found, the magician, whose daughter is played by Tyrone Power's daughter, who has inherited her father's Captain Marvel eyebrows ... Did you ever notice the resemblance of the original Captain Marvel and Power...

I seem to have strayed from the subject.

The magician says that the only remedy *he* knows is the mystical power of somebody-or-other (I began to lose track a bit here) in Hyperboria (shades of guess who!), and the whole kit and kaboodle (Miss Power is providing the love interest for the baboon and I didn't even mention his — the baboon's — sister who is also along for the ride) take off for the polar regions, which seem to be just up the creek from Bagdad.

Here they find a troglodyte and a temperate valley in that order. In it — the valley — is a large Masonic type pyramid with a permanent *aurora borealis* floating over it. This shines down into the hollow interior which is chock full of things encased in ice. The baboon is put into a sort of basket and swung into the beam of the borealis, and turns into a handsome prince (to Miss Power's relief). There is the *de rigueur* final battle between the friendly giant troglodyte and the guardian of the pyramid, a thawed out sabre-tooth tiger that looks like a Steiff toy with hydrophobia.

The wicked witch Zenobia, who was responsible for all this and who has been following with her son whom she wants to be crowned in a boat rowed by a giant iron robot with a bull's head named (I think) Minotan... I've lost control of this sentence completely. Anyhow, Zenobia gets done in; I'm not sure how because I dozed for a minute, but I'm fairly certain it wasn't with a pail of water. And everybody lives happily ever after... until the next Sinbad movie.

Now all of this is got through by waiting for the next effect; they turn up at rhythmic intervals of every ten minutes or so, and while many of them are quite marvelous, they soon begin to achieve all the magic of yet another hoop skirt in the third hour of *Gone With the Wind*.

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I particularly liked the skeletal types conjured up out of the fire; they had really insectoid bug-eyed-monster heads and sword-fought beautifully. And the inside of the pyramid, with its flow of blue borealis fire, had a nice Merrittesque quality.

And the royal baboon, which was a simulacra (depriving a *real* baboon of a job, I might add) was pretty good.

But the giant fly and the giant walrus were boring.

Now you're sitting there and saying, "But these things are meant for children, and you're just too grown up and sophisticated."

Let me counter that with: a) I'm an aficionado of the really great children's fantasies, and return to my Graham and Kipling and E. Nesbit quite regularly. In fact, in thinking about E. Nesbit lately, I'm more and more convinced that this underrated lady was a pivotal turn-of-the-century force in the formation of the coherent fantasy and therefore of science fiction. But that's another Ph. D. thesis... and b) All the children in the theater with me at this movie were much too occupied in stuffing their third bag of popcorn into their mouths and running up and down the aisles to be in the least interested in what was happening on the screen. Even granting that the American child of today has an attention span of about 20 seconds *except* for stuffing their mouths with popcorn and running up and down the aisles, I still think it says something about Mr. Harryhausen's movie-making.

Oh, yes, I might add that the young Mr. Wayne is of the Colgate School of acting, and that Margaret Whiting (of all people) as the wicked witch was quite creditable, and wins the Gale Sondergaard Award of the year.

Things-to-come-dept... Would you believe something called *The Incredible Shrinking Woman* with Lily Tomlin? I don't either, but we can hope.

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This singular story is filled with cozy domestic details like Tupperware parties and Brand Names, and yet there is something about it that is incalculably strange and chilling . . .

Shan

by KIT REED

When Ella Demper said she was giving another party at her house I thought Oh no, not after the Billie Burke fashion party, where we ended up getting our winter wardrobes for the next ten years because Ella wouldn't let us leave until we did, or the Marvalon cosmetics party, I have enough false eyelashes in my dresser to last ten movie stars a hundred years. Ella gives beautiful parties, but it's always the kind where you have your friends and neighbors in and everybody has to buy something, you know, combining pleasure with profit, like it says in the brochure. As if that isn't enough she won't let you out the door until you've signed up to sell a line yourself, and the clothes or cosmetics or whatever they were always seem so pretty and easy to sell that I end up signing up for a gross of this or a consignment of that because I am convinced that if Ella can do it, I can do it too. Well you just try and invite somebody to your own Tupperware party when Ella has already had hers; they always know your party won't be as good as her party was even if you spend days on the decorations and besides they've got their own Tupperware to sell.

You would think by this time I would know better, but the thing is, Ella's parties are always just lovely, she works on the food and decorations for days and the place always looks just like a fairyland, with angels made out of pie tins and gilded corncobs and at Christmas time she makes gilded macaroni wreaths to hang in the windows; she takes the lids off all her frozen orange juice containers and strings them up on the trees outside, it's the prettiest thing when they all start turning in the wind. But sometimes I do wonder, do you really want all them pastel petty-fours, or the ice cream towers or the violin

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music like she had for the Faberware party, when every time you take a bite of cookie you know you're going to have to pay?

I would have to admit I always think twice and then I always go, because I don't get invited out that much, being one woman alone, it's a nice change from the television in the mornings and the television in the afternoon and all those times I call my doctor just to hear another human voice. Now my sister Cynthia used to get us out of the house and she would even have people in but she's been gone for five years now, and I would have to admit that if I balanced off the parts I miss, like her company, against the rest of it, I might as well tell you I'm glad I have the morning paper all to myself now, and when I want to go in the bathroom I never have to wait, and I'm glad I don't have to watch her eat toast from the middle out, ever again. Even when I cut off the crusts for her she would start nibbling in the middle, and she would leave the part where I'd gone to all the trouble to cut off the crusts.

So when Ella called I had, you know, mixed emotions. I really do love her parties, but I was standing there in my Billie Burke negligee and the Glamorware mules with the ostrich plumes, I was holding the Tupperware box I keep my stockings in because it was the last of the gross and I couldn't think what else to do with it. I was standing there looking at the plaques and the wastebasket I made out of the decopage kit we bought at that party and I was weighing her invitation, thinking: Can I afford it?

So I said, "I'd love to come, Ella, but can I afford it?"

Well she got huffy and said, "Celia, I don't always have things for sale."

"All right then, what is it?"

"It's a him."

"A man?"

She hemmed and hawed and finally she said, "Sort of. I mean, Celia, all I can tell you is it's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, I want you to meet this politician."

"And we're all going to have to campaign and lick envelopes."

"Not exactly." She managed to make it sound important. "He's, well, he's in exile."

"*Exile.*" I was thinking of the Hungarians she had us find homes for all those years ago, the Cubans, the Vietnamese.

"You'll see," she said.

"*You're not trying to get us to take in war orphans or anything ...*"

"He's real unusual," she said, and she wouldn't answer another question. "You'll see."

Well I hadn't been out of the house since Alva Edgar's funeral, and there was my Billie Burke cocktail gown that I hadn't even

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worn yet. I told her I'd be there, but at the same time I knew I had better tuck in my checkbook, just in case.

The house looked just like a fairyland, she had sprayed Saralee cake tins with red flocking and put them around the doorway so when you came in you knew right away you were somewhere different, and what's more she had put a big orange balloon in the living room ceiling with yellow streamers coming out from it, and all the cookies I saw were frosted in red and yellow and orange and she had even put yellow cellophane around all the lamps so it had a real unearthly glow, and when we were all assembled and a kind of hush had fallen, she said:

"Girls, welcome to the planet Torg."

Now I will go along with anything. I was getting little shivers just like all the rest, but at the same time I had this funny feeling, you know, wondering, is she serious or is she not? Nothing more happened just then, she had pretty drinks of cranberry juice with lemon slices floating in them. I had the idea they might have been spiked so I took it easy, but my they were good. When I asked her about the taste she made me look closely at the ice, would you believe she had put orange juice in shapes and stuck it in her freezer and then put it in the drinks? I told her it was the loveliest thing I had seen in a long time, and she was real pleased. Binnie Osterwald has a grandson that plays one of them Indian things, you know, the sitar, and he was plinking away in the corner while we sat there drinking cranberry surprise underneath that orange balloon. I remember thinking, you know, this really *is* like some other planet, it is hardly like we are in Plainville at all.

By that time we were halfway through the evening and Ella still hadn't brought out any merchandise, those were her Ginny Simms cups and saucers with the delicate shamrock tracery and the silver rim that she's had for years, and her clothes were all things from other parties: The Faith Domergue strapless and the Pantone stockings with the Glintone mules; even the eyelashes were from one of her old consignments. So whatever it was she was selling at this party, it wasn't anything we could see, at least right then, and when I asked her why it was a planet Torg party she said oh, it was just a little old idea she got from the special parties issue of *Woman's Day.*

Well I should have known better, but I was getting squiffy on the cranberry surprise, I was feeling mellower and mellower, and Ella, she even told us how she made the casserole, you make this bed of

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Fritos and cover it with Bumble Bee tuna and mandarin orange sections and pour Campbell's chicken soup over that and bake. Of course she made it a little different by grating cheese on top, and she put in an egg, like Ella says whenever you ask her any recipe, "I always add an egg," Which means she is proving she's better than the directions on any old package, you know, a real cook. The cupcakes were the best, afterward she said she mixed up chocolate Jello instant pudding with Duncan Hines cake mix and a couple of other things, and the frosting was really just a light dusting of Jello powder, you can imagine how good it was. I was feeling real good by then, happy and sort of special because Ella had never given away *two* of her special recipes in one night, and I was the only one she told. So when she brought him out I thought he was just somebody special to sing or dance to make the party better, like Binnie's grandson, and I thought, good old Ella, well we deserve it after all those years of buying things.

If I knew then what I know now.

He was young, almost as young as Binnie's grandson, who had disappeared by that time, off to some rock and roll concert I suppose. But this wasn't any kid; he was handsomer than anybody I have ever seen, even Eben Ringer, that I almost married when we were seventeen, except that this one had something different about him, his skin was off-color just a little, like what was running underneath it wasn't just your ordinary blood, and his head was a little longer than your average, maybe to make room for a special kind of brain. He looked around at us with eyes like electric lamps, and when his eyes raked me I thought I was going to die right there, I would of done anything he asked.

"Girls," Ella said, when he had looked around at us and the room was completely silent, "This is a person from another planet," and I tell you, we thought she had gone a little bit too far with her entertainment, but there was not a one of us there that would of denied that's exactly what he was.

Then he spoke, all he said was, "Good evening," but we knew.

After that it turned out the balloon up in the ceiling, that I told you about? Well it wasn't a balloon after all, it was more like a special projector, except the pictures were all inside of it? It was kind of like a crazy crystal ball, and we all sat there with our cranberry juice drinks with the frozen orange juice shapes clinking against the glass while he told us such a story as you would never believe outside a fairy tale, except there were the pictures inside the ball to prove it was true.

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It turned out they were pictures of the place he came from, with these fierce good-looking people wandering up and down these buildings he said were all made out of ivory, although I swear to God I never heard tell of elephants that big. The sky was a funny color too, but never mind, if the lights went on and these turned out to be Puppetoons that was still a good show.

Funny thing was, it wasn't Puppetoons. He was making those pictures with this thing he took out of his pocket, it was like he shot them into the air and the balloon or whatever it was took them and made them bigger so we could see. We looked at a whole bunch of them ivory houses and then we looked at his house, him with his mother and father, except he called them Mentors, and I thought about having him to bring up and send off to school in the mornings with the lunch pail and the slicked-down hair and I thought, Aaaawww.

The next thing was this picture of a whole bunch of them sitting around in this red garden and then everybody got a scared look because this elephant was coming over the hill, at least I think it was an elephant but it was so big that the only things that would fit in the picture were this big hoof with big yellow nails on it and the tippy end of this enormous tusk and he never spoke or anything but he managed to make it plain that these things were overrunning his world now, there wasn't any place for a body to sit down or build a house because of all the giant elephants and something had to give, either the elephants or them. When we got to see the pictures of the war, it was terrible, by the time it was over they were all retching and staggering a round because the air was poisoned and all the planets were poison too, they all had to take canned things into the underground shelters and they only had X years of food and oxygen left.

He raked us with those eyes again, it made you go all weak to see them, and he said, "And so you see, I need your help, you good ladies can be my missionaries, and you will be rewarded in the new civilization."

So I guess it was a little bit like a Tupperware party after all, we were supposed to give parties like this one for all our friends and we would all get to take one of those picture balloons and when we got a bunch together Shan would come and talk to them personally, no obligation and nothing to buy, and we would earn his eternal gratitude. So that sounded good but there was this long silence while we all thought about it, you know, trying to work it out: what he wanted us to do.

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Then Ella spoke up, after all it was her party, and she said, "Shan, honey, you'd better tell the girls what it is you need."

He looked at her like she was a damn fool and I thought she was a little bit slow myself, he said, "My dear we need a new place."

"What kind of place?"

"This place," he said, and spread his hands wide enough to take in the entire world.

Now I thought that wasn't such a bad idea, after all, we had opened up our hearts to the Hungarians and the Cubans and the Vietnamese, but then Binnie, it was, had to ask:

"How many of you are there?"

Well the figure was, if you'll pardon the expression, astronomical, and everybody gasped and muttered and finally Ella said:

"Shan, honey, what would we have to do?"

Well it was simple enough, we would give these parties and get fifty people into every one of them, and those fifty would get together another fifty each, and at the end of every party everybody there would be given this beautiful Torg mastadon tusk brooch, set with real emeralds, and all we had to do was wear the brooch, there was one stone that would come out of the center, not spoiling anything. and all you had to do was sneak it into the reservoir?

You can imagine the fuss the girls made, they wanted to know what that would do to the water and Shan, he wouldn't exactly say, he would only say, It makes it good for Torgans too, and besides, as long as you wear your beautiful brooch it won't bother you, and I can tell you that made some people suspicious. Binnie said, Why don't you go to the UN and get a right regular entrance permit? and all Shan would say was, sometimes the longest way round is the shortest way home. Then Ella said, You never told us what was going to happen to the water, but Shan, he just smiled that gorgeous smile and said, All of Torg will be grateful to you.

I could see the way things were going, Ella and Binnie were muttering in a corner and the others were all hissing and chattering, you know, agitated, and I thought, Poor Shan, he has come all this way and the girls aren't going to help. Then I caught what one of them was saying and I slipped over to Shan and touched the brooch and I whispered:

"You better look sharp, honey, I think these girls are thinking to turn you in."

Well you should of seen the look he gave me, it would have melted a brick. He sort of aimed the brooch and whispered, "Are you with me?"

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So I looked into them eyes and I said, "Yes, Shan, I am."

It only took a second; the brooch he was holding was all it took to do the trick, the beam came right out the point of the tusk. I felt a little bad about it but not for long, because I am Shan's best friend now, and when I looked around and saw the rest of the girls I knew I wouldn't have any competition, no mealy mouths coming around to take him out riding, no prissy faces bringing in covered dishes or brownies or angel cakes that they made from a mix and were trying to pass off as an old family recipe.

What that brooch did was, it beamed out in some weird way that a scientist would have to explain to you, and there were all those girls that I got old with, they weren't hurt a bit but they wouldn't hurt anybody else again either. Ella wouldn't be giving any more parties that it cost you a hundred bucks just to get out the door and at that you would have to take home a lot of junk you didn't need. Binnie wouldn't be going around to the rock and roll concert to bother her grandson, and none of the others would be nagging or writing angry letters or keeping you hung up on the phone while your TV dinner burned. On the other hand if you wanted to see any of them or talk to them that would be possible; you could go over to Ella's and see them anytime because what that beam did was freeze them stiff, they were cool as cucumbers and stock-still right where he caught them, they looked like it didn't hurt a bit and I must say it looked real natural. They looked — how should I say it? — calm.

Shan was more or less watching me while I looked at them all: would I scream or was I going to be all right? Well I just turned to him and I said, cool as a cucumber, "It's all right, Shan, they were never any friends of mine."

Then I helped him carry his case of Forever brooches and the box of balloons out of Ella's house and put them in my car.

He was real pleased with my house when we got there because it's right near the town reservoir, and he liked his room that used to be my sister Cynthia's because he said it afforded him a real good view of the town. Then we put the box of balloons and the case of brooches in the corner and he said, How can I ever thank you, and I blushed and pointed to the brooches and told him I would like one of them. It was in the shape of an elephant tusk, all studded with emeralds and diamonds, and I went all shivery when he pinned it to the folds on the front of my Billie Burke cocktail dress. Then he gave me a balloon for my very own living

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room and he was so grateful to me for helping him escape that he said he was going to tell me all about his mission, except he called it Our Mission, right after we ate, and I said, Shan, honey, that's just wonderful.

Well after supper it didn't turn out just the way he thought, and come to think of it, I'm just as glad. What he did was, he asked me for a list of my friends — you know, for the party? — and I would rather die than admit to him that I didn't have any. I mean my whole mortal acquaintance was frozen cold and stiff back there at Ella Kemper's house and besides, I didn't really think that business about poisoning the water was such a good idea. I mean, it wasn't very *nice* and I would feel just terrible, but there was no way to tell him that, so while he was making plans and finishing his Royal ice-box cheesecake with the strawberry preserves, I got around where he couldn't see what I was doing, and I found the right stone to press and let him have it with the brooch.

It's real nice to have somebody here to eat my meals with and talk to when I feel like it, he looks real natural setting up there in the chair, and I have a pretty good idea that even though he's as stiff as one of them giant elephant tusks, he can still hear. He's got a real pleasant expression on him, kind of surprised, and the two of us have nice talks because he never ever disagrees. The other nice thing is he doesn't mess up the house any or dirty any laundry, and what's more he never complains about my cooking, the way Cynthia always did. If I ever figure out how to unfreeze him and I want to make toast for him, I just know he would eat it all the way a person is supposed to, instead of from the middle out, and what's more he would never, ever leave his crusts.

Coming soon

Next month: "The Night of the Tiger," a brand-new story by Stephen King, author of *Carrie* and *Salem's Lot*.

March: Special all-star Spring issue, featuring new stories by John Varley, Randall Garrett, Ted Thomas, Manly Wade Wellman and others.

Soon: Special All-British issue! Stunning stories and articles by England's finest; more about this later.

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Jeffrey Carver is 27 and has sold several sf stories and a novel. He writes: "I grew up in Huron, Ohio but have been living in the R. I. or Boston area since attending school at Brown University and the University of Rhode Island (graduate). From the latter institution I am the proud possessor of a Masters of Marine Affairs degree, which qualifies me for, um, writing sf stories about the ocean . . ."

Seastate Zero

by JEFFREY A. CARVER

News of the oilspill got around quickly at NorthAtStat Two. Robert Dalton, Diving Chief, caught it in the sonarphone chatter muttering about him in the cockpit of a utility sub. It took him a moment to react, since he was busy at the time keeping an eye on the divers working in front of the sub among the floodlights and farming cages and on the hangar-bound geesurv gliding by like a lanternfish. Simultaneously, he was taking his own notes on the kelp beds arrayed beneath the lights and on the algae confines and the snooping, poking bottomfish. Finally he thumbed his mike. "Station ...Utility 3. What's that I just heard?"

A voice crackled into the cockpit over the whine of servos. "Utility 3 ... Station. Bulletin from mainside. A ULCC, fully loaded, has gone down in a storm about two hundred kilometers south. No real details yet, but apparently it's spilling a godawful lot of oil."

"That right?" Dalton said. He pushed his throttle forward, steering the sub in closer to the kelp beds. The geesurv passed to his right, winked a spotlight in greeting. An Ultra Large Crude Carrier? That was the old gargantuan-style tanker; he hadn't known that any were still in use, since the disastrous days of the early nineties. Not that much oil was being shipped to the States these days, anyway, he had thought. Showed how much he knew.

He drove past the kelp beds, finishing his inspection; overall, they were in fine shape, growing quickly in the steady nutrient outflow and artificial sunlight. Dalton escorted the two divers back across the floodlighted seafloor complex, then — past the fat concrete sausage which housed science/survey and across the silt courtyard to the hangar/lockout wing. The

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divers disappeared into the wet-room well, and Dalton maneuvered beneath the hangar bay and pumped ballast. Motors whined, and the water surface broke and danced brightly around the clear window of the cockpit. He jockeyed into a docking cradle and secured the controls while the hangar operator, inside the station, lowered a one-atmosphere entry tube to the sub's hatch. Seal was achieved with a *thunk* and *hiss*, and when the safety light glowed, Dalton undogged the hatch and climbed out through the laddered tube leading, through a safety lock, into the main hangar room.

He waved to the operator and stopped to chat briefly by intercom with the two divers in the eight-atmospheres saturation quarters; then he headed for the lounge in the main living sphere. The room was duskily lighted, one curved wall lined with aquamarine portals; off-duty personnel were relaxing and enjoying dinner with a view. Dalton took a fish plate and beer and sat down at a viewport table where an engineer, Randy Johnson, was discoursing on the implications of the tanker accident.

Dalton was startled by the conversation. He had put the incident out of his mind virtually as soon as he had heard of it.

"There'll be panic right now from the Jersey shore up to the Cape, and then some," Johnson said, shaking his head. "Thing went down leaking like a sieve, apparently — and it was an old ship, probably fifteen, twenty years. They can't do a thing, there's a bitch of a storm going on up there now." Johnson was a new man at the station. He was energetic, always moving, always speaking. Unlike those who had been at the station longer, he was knowledgeable — and concerned — about matters of importance to mainside. Dalton, more in keeping with the rule, regarded outside news as a matter of mere idle curiosity.

"What caused it?" Dalton asked, savoring his beer.

Johnson explained: "Collision, outside the Jersey Sea Lanes. A cargo semi sub, *Scoville*, ripped the bottom out of *Mozambique* — that's the tanker — and then sank like a stone. Everyone got off *Mozam*, but nobody off *Scoville*. They say it was pretty bad."

Dalton stared out the viewport, thinking about that — stared at the Atlantic seafloor and the complex awash with floods and hazy like a stilled snowfall. The reactor/MHD vessel was just in his angle of sight, a black-and-white checkered shell in the greenish mist; it was a primary reason for the station's existence, feeding several thousand megawatts mainside to the North-AmNet power grid and producing

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hydrogen and oxygen for both local and mainside use. Lockout/hangar and science/survey made the rest of the station look like a giant igloo complex. A maintenance sub moved slowly across the silt-floored courtyard, its spot and navlights tiny against the glare of the station floods. Always someone working, someone inspecting. How to relate that to a million-ton oilspill?

One million tons, he thought, unable to envision it. Yes, he expected that the picture topside would be pretty bad — and a good thing that it would have only minimal impact down here.

His attention turned to a more pleasant subject. Marnie Cella was heading across the lounge, and he greeted her warmly as she squeezed past the others to join him — bringing another beer for him, good girl. "Well, did you make it over the top?" he asked, enthusiastically. Along with the other geologists, Marnie had been running herself ragged to complete a sediment analysis for some antsy group back mainside.

Marnie slumped and groaned and pushed at her glass of beer. "Not yet. I hear there's lots of excitement up there about some storm. Maybe they'll forget all about wanting the bloody thing. Actually, we're almost done." She yawned, then smiled, looking out from behind her tousled chestnut hair. "Nice to see you for five minutes. How was your day?"

"Not exciting." Which was how he preferred it, since excitement in his position usually meant trouble. "What say we do nothing, tonight, and go to bed early?" They had hardly seen one another the past few days, and he had missed her company.

Marnie pressed her lips together, and he knew he'd said the wrong thing. "I've got to work for a while, yet, Bob. And I sort of told Sed that I'd go with him." She looked at him uncomfortably, then looked down.

Dalton did not answer, but neither did he conceal his disappointment. Theirs had always been an open relationship ... but more open for her than for him. Marnie leaned over at once and squeezed his hand. "Bob, why don't you ask someone else? You haven't for a long time." He pulled back his hand slowly, knowing that she had not meant that to hurt. All right, so there was no one else; enough on that topic.

He forced a smile. "Okay, but at least don't rush your dinner."

Marnie's reply was interrupted by an intercom call for Dalton: he was wanted in the station director's office. "Damn!" he growled. "More work."

He finished his meal quickly and hurried upstairs. Jim Bronell's

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office looked like a mainside office neatly compacted into a closet. The director sat moodily behind his desk, frowning.

"Jenny will be here," Bronell said. "You've heard about the tanker sinking?" Dalton sat in the extra chair and nodded. "Well, we're going to undertake salvage."

Dalton snorted. "I just knew you'd try to ruin my evening." Then he decided that the man was serious, and he gazed curiously. "Jim, we have no equipment for oil recovery."

"Of course we don't," Bronell agreed. "But we have the only saturation unit available. Habitat, divers, subs. All you have to do is provide link-up for the submarine barges now on their way."

"That's all, huh? How far away is this wreck?"

"About two hundred kilometers southwest. About a hundred thirty meters depth."

"That's way beyond our range," Dalton said flatly. "I wouldn't dream of it without surface support — and if they had that, they wouldn't need us. Where are the oil divers? What about the bunch at Jersey Offshore? Why us?" He was genuinely baffled. There had to be a dozen groups better equipped, better qualified.

Bronell nodded. "All good questions. There's a hurricane topside, and everything is battened down. *Everything*. They couldn't begin to get near the site, and it's expected to last for days." Dalton considered that. The storm was topside — what would *he* know about it? Bronell went on: "It has to be done from our end. The offshore terminal is tied up and generally up to their ears in the storm. It's us, or nobody."

Perhaps, Dalton suggested, "nobody" was the best candidate.

Bronell stared, nodding. "It's not our territory and, for that matter, none of our business. Right? I almost agree with you."

"So what —"

Bronell cut him off. "Some people here could be out of a job if we don't go. For one thing. And those aren't my words." Bronell looked at him expressionlessly.

To Dalton, this suddenly ceased being a discussion. The station was his life, his world; it had been *the* world for the last six years, and the life he had led before that time was lost to oblivion in his memory. He breathed slowly, trying to think of a reply to *that*. Pressure from somewhere upstairs. If mainside failed to appreciate him, they could replace him, as simply as that. Could that really be? To leave the station, to leave the ocean — it was unthinkable. "Oh," he said at last. He eyed Bronell.

Jenny Cowen arrived at that moment, and Bronell repeated the

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gist of the discussion, omitting only the last detail. Cowen, a lean brunette dressed in shorts and khaki work shirt, was Dalton's immediate junior, the dive leader. She reacted as he had. "Bob," she said dryly, "who do we have who knows *anything* about oil operations?"

"No one," Dalton said.

Bronell was losing patience. "*Mozambique*," he said, "is a million-ton oilgusher. Do you know how much damage that can cause? I don't, I can't even imagine! But it's already dumped god knows how many thousands of tons off the coast!" He was glaring, now.

Dalton thought carefully. Did Bronell understand what he was asking, the physical and psychological risk? Two hundred kilometers was *very far away*. Still, there was the oilspill. And his job. "Possibly," he said, stalling, "we could be considered to have a professional responsibility."

Cowen disagreed. "Our responsibility's here. We're science divers, maintenance divers. We wouldn't even begin to know what we're doing, or what special hazards to be aware of."

"You'll confer with experts mainside on details," Bronell said. "They'd fly in, but everything's grounded."

Jenny turned to Dalton, obviously expecting support. He hesitated and tried to consider: just what *was* his sphere of responsibility? They so rarely thought beyond their enclave here: the complex, the outer perimeter, the lights, the walls. Their home ended at the periphery, at the edge of the cold and the dark. Was that merely a habit of thinking, or was it deeper, more subtle, something which mainside could never understand? If they refused this job, would it be a matter of cowardice ... or a consequence of the changed breed they had become?

When he answered, it was to Jenny, and with no clear idea what had turned his mind. "It's our territory now," he said. "We can learn what we need to know. And we'll go with volunteers." He met her astonished gaze uncompromisingly. Jenny and he were not of a kind, nor were they close friends. She had the better relationship with the crew and was aware of the fact, but that was a personality difference. Where the job was concerned, he had no qualms with her. Though he could not make her like it, he was confident that she would cooperate.

"When will you be under way?"

"When we are prepared," Dalton said without warmth. He thought wistfully of his bunk and the consolation that he would have no opportunity to miss Marnie tonight.

* * *

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The mobile habitat *Lair* departed NorthAtStat Two at 0400 the following morning. Flanked by a remotely piloted supply "truck" and by a two-man utility sub, it slowly crossed the courtyard and disappeared into the still-dark distance, leaving a fading impression of an enjeweled shadow. Dalton watched it go; then he swallowed half a cup of lukewarm coffee, grimaced wretchedly, and went back to work.

Lair was the slowest vessel in the expedition but the most crucial — it would be their on-the-site home. Extra supplies had been loaded, and *Truck 1* carried exchangeable hydrogen and oxygen cylinders for *Lair's* fuel cells. Jenny Cowen was in charge of *Lair*, with Jim Miller the pilot and medical officer. Also aboard were divers Don Phelps, Andrea Thomas, Jason Johns, Timothy Sal, and Cy Radmont. The utility sub was going along for added safety; it carried no divers.

Dalton's night had been miserable, beginning with the raising of a volunteer crew. Everyone was deterred by the distance: two hundred kilometers away was someone else's worry. Arguments were repeated a dozen times. Bronell backed Dalton up with a few promises and some rather bald threats. By the time he had his volunteers, Dalton was virtually convinced that his arguments were all lies and that he was only trying to save his own skin. He didn't know what to think, anymore; he only wanted everyone concerned, including himself, to stay persuaded.

Throughout the night he had conferred by phone with experts mainside and at the Jersey Offshore Terminal, gathering as much information as possible. *Mozambique's* layout, probable condition, procedures for offloading. He had listened past the point of exhaustion — and still there was more. He could sleep on the way out. Two other divers and a pilot would travel with him in the lockout sub *Gagnan*; even with a late start, they expected to reach the tanker before *Lair*.

Marnie stopped by to wish him well. "Looks like that crew will follow you anywhere," she joked, with a trace of awe and considerable apprehensiveness. He looked at her cross-eyed, her words barely registering. "Hey —" she said, "don't forget to come back, okay?" She left, then, giving him a light kiss on the cheek.

When *Gagnan* and its drone, *Truck 2*, were secure and Dalton and the others were aboard, pilot Tom Lansing took them smoothly down and away from the hangar. With *Truck 2* on remote-guidance alongside, they cruised slowly through the garish emerald mist of

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the seafloor complex, past the main living sphere alight with clear portals, past the enormous egg of the reactor vessel, and turned south-southwest into gloomy, empty ocean.

Dalton slumped in his seat and stared uneasily at all that emptiness surrounding him. Finally he simply ignored it, ignored the whine of pumps and motors, closed his eyes gratefully and slept.

They passed, hours later, within sonar range of *Lair*, and Dalton woke to learn that the habitat had stopped for its first refueling. Assured that divers were in the water, exchanging fuel cylinders without difficulty, he instructed Lansing to continue on course. The others would catch up in their own time; right now, he was anxious to locate the sunken tanker and see firsthand what sort of monster he was chasing.

He ducked aft into the lockout chamber, a spartan little compartment, where Gary Kante and Ron Benson were stretched out on benches on either side of the floor well hatch. "Comfortable?" Dalton asked, stooping between them.

Kante, a large man, grunted. "Must be joking." He shifted heavily, looking around at the curved ceiling-walls, at the racks of diving gear taking much of the space. He was quite obviously neither comfortable nor in the mood for conversation.

Dalton nodded. He passed them packed lunches from the cockpit and then returned, crouching, to his seat. For a time after that, all he noticed were whirring electric thrusters, the whispering recirculator, the beeping navguidance. "Doing okay?" Lansing asked, his face oddly lighted by the outside glow of the nose-light, by the red illumination of the gauge panel.

"More or less." He wasn't sure, but perhaps at this point he was better off not knowing what the others were thinking — since he wasn't too happy with what *he* was thinking.

"They'll be cranky for a while, I suppose," Lansing said, sensing his disquiet. Lansing had been the first to volunteer. "Want to drive?"

"Sure." Dalton took the controls while Lansing stretched his legs. Through the acrylic nose he could see a few meters ahead and a few down: flying yellowish haze, unthreatening and equally uninteresting. He watched the navguide needles, the VLF Loran readout, ranging sonar, drone sonar, internal-systems monitors; he made a small adjustment from time to time and wished grouchily that the hours would pass more quickly.

"Got something on sonar!"

Dalton grumbled, waking. He

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rubbed his cramped neck, looked at the screen Lansing was stabbing with a finger, and grunted. Large raised obstruction on the seafloor, range a kilometer. "Fuel?"

"At this rate, two hours to reserve," Lansing said. He passed the word to the men aft, adding that the object had yet to be identified.

Dalton waited anxiously. Was this his troublemaker, the disturber of his peace of mind?

Lansing eased back to dead slow, as the range closed, and he snapped several switches. Emerald-white spotlights sprang ahead in a stunning array. The sonar target, or a small section of it, materialized in the glare like the insurmountable wall of a fantastic, sunken city: a sheer flat face rising from the sediment and vanishing into the gloom in either direction. The sight was so startlingly featureless that there was no true sensation of size, and only their awareness of the sunken tanker's immensity gave meaning to this small dab of hull in the light beam.

Lansing guided *Truck 2* to rest on the seafloor, then keyed its sonar beacon and sonar transponder. Releasing the drone from control, he turned his attention to surveying the shipwreck.

There was no doubt that the ship was *Mozambique* — and it proved even more enormous than they had imagined. A slow, careful circuit around the entire bottom section of the hull gave a better indication of its size, but not of its condition; the bow showed visible damage, but the gross condition of the hull was difficult to judge. A jagged rupture they found amidships might have been caused by buckling either from the collision or from the impact on bottoming; either way, that compartment had apparently already emptied. Basically, however, the ship appeared to be squarely settled on the bottom.

"Let's circuit the upper deck," Dalton said. "That's where we're going to find out what's what."

Lansing pitched the sub into a climb, and they angled upward along the steel wall until it broke sharply to a horizontal deck. Servo-controls whined as he leveled and stabilized the sub. "The deck is at one hundred thirty-four meters," he said, glancing at his gauges. "Fourteen-point-four atmospheres for you fellows." He turned the sub for a beam-wise view across the deck. The water was clearer, visibility ten to fifteen meters. The deck, lined with pipes and fittings, looked in the lightbeams like the surface of a vast and strange, lifeless spacecraft.

They began another circuit. Dalton hunched at the nose, swiveling the spotlights, straining to pick some meaningful sign out of the

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glare and the gloom. Pipelines and walkways passed slowly before them, like the edge of a ponderous carrousel. He had never seen anything like this, and it was entrancing; it seemed to fit the scene as though it had always belonged here.

Lansing braked suddenly, jolting him forward. "What's up?" squawked a voice over the intercom. "Sorry," said Lansing, "we've found a leak."

Dalton stared at the black oil billowing upward just in front of them. It was escaping in great spasmodic black gulps, apparently from a cracked and buckled seam at the very edge of the deck. This, too, seemed a normal and natural feature — and the fact that he knew it was not gave him, for a moment, a queer feeling of schizophrenia. He had to force his thoughts back to reality. "Can you swing us to the inboard side and give us a better view all around?"

Lansing looked doubtful. "Could be other fractures just waiting to loose a gob under us."

"Just what we've got to find out. If we're going to camp on the deck, I want to know how safe it is."

Lansing complied.

Most of the decking appeared sound, and they moved on. By the end of the inspection circuit, they had sighted five additional leaks of varying severity, but the bulk of the cargo seemed relatively intact, for the present. What they could not guess was how quickly time, strain, and corrosion might take their toll. And that, Dalton thought, might be a bad thing not to know.

Lansing rendezvoused with *Truck 2*, then guided both vehicles upward to a landing on the tanker's foredeck, which they had chosen as a campsite.

They would wait for the arrival of the other group before moving or refueling. Time for a meal and perhaps another nap.

When *Lair* made sonar contact five hours later, its pilot Jim Miller reported that the utility sub had been forced back, due to a difficulty in refueling. It was not a good way to start — the sub, with its array of mechanical appendages, might have been useful for heavy tasks — and Dalton was not happy. "Let's hope we won't need it," he said, silently suppressing his own misgivings.

"Tom," he said shortly afterward, as he watched *Lair* pull in beside them, "the boat's yours." Lansing would be making *Gagnan's* cockpit his home, isolated from the depth-saturated divers for the duration; it would be a lonely vigil. Dalton joined the two divers in the lockout compartment.

They geared up in near silence. Kante and Benson dressed in yel-

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low-and-blue patchwork suits, while Dalton wore the yellow-and-black stripes of the diving chief. When they were dressed, Dalton turned to the circuit panel and thumbed the LOCKOUT key. "Pressurizing," he warned. A helium-nitrogen-oxygen draft roared into the chamber. In the deafening blast, the men pinched their nostrils to clear ears and sinuses and kept at least one eye apiece on the pressure and gas-mixture gauges. The "air" tasted faintly of metal and grew noticeably denser as the chamber pressure mounted; it was roastingly hot, with the only relief the promise of quick cooling once they reached "depth."

The gas trailed finally to a low hiss and then stopped as a relief valve in the escape well sputtered. "Fourteen - point - four atmospheres," Dalton announced, his voice twanging two octaves higher than its normal pitch. "Depth ceiling will be one hundred twenty-eight meters."

"Yah, let's go," Benson said and opened the exit hatch. The water was green and cold and calm in the well, and a bit gloomy, even with the keel lights shining. Still, it appeared inviting, from the cramped and hot chamber.

Preparations continued. Weight harnesses were secured and locked. Cryo-electronic scuba checked thoroughly, hoisted onto their backs, and harnessed. Gas feeders hooked into the suit-integrated buoyancy-control cells and tested. Helmets on, with gasflow connections, power and sonarphone plugs. Each diver was checked by the other two, and each man circuit-tested the gas-depth-time display above his eyes. Faceplate visors were sealed, and mitts pulled snug.

Dalton followed the others down the well. The sea stole his weight from him as he sank, pulling the hatch closed, and he slipped on his fins and floated down and clear beneath the sub. The ocean seemed floodlighted like a stadium in a light evening fog, and cheerfully cool. He quarter-somersaulted, and finned out to join Kante and Benson, waiting alongside the sub. "Dalton here ... phone check, please," he chirped. A pitch-corrector in the helmetphone restored his voice in transmission to approximately its normal tone.

"Kante here ... okay."

"Benson here ... no problems."

"Very good. Proceed with refueling on *Gagnan*. *Gagnan*, are you there?"

"Yo."

Dalton swam to the nose of the sub and peered in through the dark bubble. Lansing waved, directly in his face.

"See you later," Dalton said and turned toward the habitat *Lair*, a bright-haloed spacecraft in the

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ocean haze, resting on the large extensible feet. Divers there were already completing another refueling and were opening storage bays and racking equipment. Dalton located Jenny Cowen, in a yellow-and-black checkered suit, and asked how the crew members from the habitat were faring.

"Holding up, but no one rested well during the trip," she told him, turning until her helmet-light struck him full in the face. The tone of her voice was impossible to judge. "We all think we're a little crazy, but no one's asked to go home."

"Good enough. I'm going to scout the unloading connection with Phelps, then," Dalton said. "You keep things moving here, Jenny." Hailing Phelps, their best handyman-engineer, he explained what he had in mind. Phelps agreed, and they set off, each flying a torpedo-like tow.

Whirring and gliding over the open deck and pipelines, only their tow and helmet lights shone into the gloom. The deck flowed beneath them steadily, seemingly endless in the patchy field of light; the backscatter from suspended particles lent a sense of flying slowly through an evening snowstorm. Eventually they followed what seemed to be main distribution lines, and a congregation of pipe junctions and valves materialized out of the gloom — the loading-off-loading terminus. Phelps studied the fittings and valves with care; they had been designed primarily for remote operation, and manual override might be a problem. Instructions had been provided, but they both knew that dry-land instructions and underwater execution were two entirely different things.

Leaving a navigational pinger on the site, they returned to the habitat and learned that the first oil barge-train was arriving and would soon be stationed alongside. The job was waiting. But first Dalton called for a rest and a planning session; he wanted no tired, mistake-prone divers outside the safety of the habitat.

Earnest work started with a skull session of the seven men and two women who would be diving. Once duties were tentatively assigned, most of the divers climbed noisily down to the wetroom to gear up. Cowen called Dalton aside in the small wardroom. "People are getting edgy. Do you still believe we can see this thing through?" she asked quietly.

Dalton considered that. He never *had* believed it, but now he was beginning to wonder. They had made it here (most of them), they were still well supplied, and that was a start. "Why not?" he said

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with a sharp, quick smile. For a moment, worry stood out clearly on Jenny's face. But if she had a suggestion to make, she kept it to herself. She clucked and turned away.

The wetroom was chilly, and Dalton was glad to leave it behind. Outside, the others had already assembled a variety of tools, power-wrenches, levers, and torches, onto sleds. Portable floodlights were the last items to be gathered, and they all moved off without delay, a convoy of sleds and divers and tows, escorted by the brightly lighted *Gagnan*.

The first on-site task was to set up floodlighting, though some dim blue sunlight was percolating downward from the now-morning world topside, providing a gloomy but improved view of the mammoth ship. Occasionally fishes moved into view, tending to their own business about this new reef; but mostly the human swimmers were alone. They quickly learned that tools had a way of misplacing themselves among the pipelines and fittings, and Dalton finally had to halt everyone to insist that all equipment not "in hand" be left only on one of the sleds. The illumination was deceptive, and shadows stalked behind and among the nine separately moving helmet lights.

Dalton put Phelps in charge of readying the pipeline terminus, while Kante and Andrea Thomas and he investigated the barge-train waiting alongside to receive the oil. From the work site, the tug seemed a shadowy whale bedecked with lights, while the barge units behind it were too amorphous to be clearly seen, except as the beginning of a string of navlights, bobbing slowly as the tug held station. Dalton swam close to the train now for the first time. The nuclear-powered towing sub was a curious affair, with a massive central fuselage and two wings supporting the impressive drivers at a great arm's length from the center. Their real concern, however, was with the barges.

"Tug pilot, this is Dalton. We are approaching—"

He felt a groan, a bass vibration like a deep gut rumble. Touching the edge of the tanker deck, he felt the steel shiver. "Cowen! What's happening back there?"

Jenny's reply was loud and flat in his ears: "I think we felt the ship settle. Is this going to be a safe platform?"

"*Gagnan*, can you check that?" He looked about in the half-lighted gloom, worriedly waiting, thinking how wholly strange this setting was — and it was because this damn ship belonged on the surface, not down here on the ocean floor.

"*Gagnan* here," he heard at last. "Yes, that is correct. *Mozam-*

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bique has settled, or readjusted herself in some way. Please give me silence for a minute, while I make a hydrophone survey."

Dalton watched his companions soberly, while Lansing worked, and pressed his palms to the deck, trying in vain to let the feel of it tell him the ship's condition. The whisper of gas in his helmet suddenly seemed a noisy, chilling draft. He turned the suit heater up a notch and was rewarded by a comforting flow of warmth.

"This is *Gagnan*," came Lansing at last. "I am picking up substantially greater rumble than previously. Hard to be sure, but I would guess that we've sprung some new leaks or widened some old ones. Either way, we're losing oil faster."

"Dalton here. That means be more careful than ever, moving about the deck. Let's get back to work." And what's this orange crate going to do, now, let loose under us with a whole million tons of oil?

He launched himself toward the first barge in a careful, upward slanting trajectory. "Kante, Thomas — we'll be only a few meters below ceiling on top of this thing. Be damn careful." Each diver's depth monitor would sound an alarm two meters below the safety limit, but a misjudgment, nevertheless, could endanger any of them with pressure sickness. He turned in midwater to direct his helmet light along the jointed, accordian-shaped feeder line, compactly folded atop the barge. The end coupling was equipped with a maneuvering unit, designed for diver-aided mating with terminals or relays. He had been assured that it would be compatible with the fittings on *Mozambique*; they would soon find out.

Cowen informed him that they were ready at her end.

"Very good. Tug pilot ... Dalton. Are you ready for hookup?"

"Dalton ... Tug. Ready when you are. We have released remote lock on Barge Number One feedline. Is our position satisfactory?"

"Affirmative." Who the hell can tell? he added silently, noting the slow swaying movements of the train as the pilot corrected for current and drift. He warned Kante and Thomas away and then vented some of his own buoyancy and settled into position on the belly-rest of the maneuvering unit. This, he thought, should be interesting. The squeeze-grip controls felt comfortable enough, and so he tested the jets with a gentle squeeze. The end of the feeder pipe rocked, rose slightly, and settled back. He squeezed harder. The unit lurched upward, and so he let off at once and gave sideward thrust. He swung out on a boom over the

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tanker — dropping quickly — and hastily increased lift again to avoid a collision with the deck. "Tricky," he remarked, jiggling the controls.

He jetted slowly across the ship's beam, dipping and swaying close to the deck, with the pipeline unkinking behind him. He aimed for the hazy glow of the work area and began to actually enjoy the ride.

"*Lookit that!*" crowed an astonished diver as he glided into their midst. But a moment later he lurched, cut power, and bounced ungracefully along the deck.

Six mirrorlike faceplates stared at him as if in awe, until someone broke into flat laughter — someone grateful, no doubt, for his anonymity. "Shall we ... proceed?" Dalton requested, trying hard to sound unperturbed. With guiding hands alongside, he boosted the feedline connector and propelled it forward to mate with the ship's terminus. There was some wrestling and prying about at the connection, and then Phelps, inspecting, pronounced it snug (he thought).

"Let's find out. Are the intermediate valves open?"

Cowen answered affirmatively. "We had to cut the hydraulic lines and force them manually. Starboard Number Five should be open."

Dalton ordered the main valve opened then — a task which required several divers, one hefting against the wheel and two holding his ankles for leverage. Seawater had already begun to freeze the works, and the effort took several long minutes.

"Tug," Dalton said. "Go ahead and pump."

There was a minute or two of silence, and then the tug pilot reported that he was receiving no flow into the barge. "Are you sure you are ready?"

Dalton looked at Cowen, at Phelps. "Apparently not. Stand by."

Phelps and three others set off with a sled full of tools, to see what they could find along the distribution pipeline. Dalton and the rest rearranged equipment and floated about and waited impatiently, until word came back that a valve had been found which was apparently jammed shut. More time passed, relaxing time, worrying time, and then word came back that *something* had been turned, and the valve might or might not be open.

Dalton told the tug pilot to try again.

"Pumps have started. We are beginning to get a flow into the barge ... seawater, so far ... stand by ... it appears, yes, we have oil flowing into the barge."

The divers cackled with surprise, and Phelps, when he returned, patted the pipe terminus

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affectionately. Perhaps it would be only a matter of time — of sixteen separate oil compartments and a similar number of barges to be filled.

Dalton blinked, amazed, and wondered if it would really keep working. He was actually beginning to feel confident.

Work proceeded slowly. Much time was consumed in nonpumping activities: resetting valves between compartments, disconnecting a full barge, repositioning the barge train, and connecting another. They concentrated first on the leakiest compartments — mostly located amidships and closest to the terminus. Lansing, aboard *Gagnan*, monitored the tanker's moanings and rumblings and made estimates as to the rate of leakage. In an effort to speed the work once things were running smoothly, Dalton organized the team into two alternating work-shifts. The system worked well until the first barge-train pulled away with a full load of oil. Then the operation came to a halt, and everyone repaired to the habitat to await the second train.

"Any word yet?" Dalton asked Miller, his voice a high twang in the open helium-rich air. He was enjoying his first leisurely hot meal in three days. He was also dying for a beer, but beer was not among their supplies; it would have been flat in the high-pressure environment, not even worth drinking.

"Just the morning breakfast," Miller answered, "and according to that, it should have arrived already. I'd send up a radio buoy, but the report said that seas topside are as heavy as ever." Outside communication without a surface antenna was limited to VLF radio reception only; they could not transmit in return, lacking the enormous antenna and power supply needed for transmission.

Jenny Cowen was irritated by the delay. "Here we are, doing someone else's job and now we have to sit waiting for them," she grumbled. "Fifteen years ago, they would have had the barges *and* divers ready to drop on the spot. Now they don't bother. If they're going to keep these huge tubs in service, somebody ought to back up for the consequences."

"Agreed," Dalton said. "But even fifteen years ago they wouldn't have had the undersea base to work from. That's our province, now."

Cowen raised her eyebrows, studying him curiously. "I thought that was just a line you used to browbeat us poor slaves into submission." She sounded distressed, that her secret judgment might have been wrong.

"Well," Dalton admitted, "that's what I thought at the time, too. Maybe now I think otherwise."

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He grinned fiendishly, enjoying her confusion. The crew were in good spirits and he was too; it seemed that people had stopped worrying and settled into *Lair* as if it were a real home. Of course, that was while they had been kept busy working; no telling the potential effect of idleness.

Cowen shook her head wonderingly. "Jim," she said, "you'd better find out what's wrong with our despot, here. I think he's gone soft on us." Miller looked from one to the other — and retreated, mumbling, into his cockpit.

Work resumed after the second barge-train arrived, and it proceeded without incident through the first two shifts.

Midway through the third shift, Dalton and Kante were tending the terminus connection, waiting for Sal and Johns to seal off an empty compartment and open the line to a full one. Dalton was floating free, and his first awareness of trouble was the sound of tortured metal, picked up by his helmetphone as a low moan. He clutched the pipeline. It was trembling as if the ship had come alive. The structure lurched, and the entire deck shifted queerly, then steadied. A dull roaring filled his ears, and that, too, subsided.

Was the deck buckled, or was that his imagination?

A cry sounded distinctly in his earphones: "Sal! Tim — where are you?"

Dalton kept silent, listening.

"Tim, I'm blinded with oil — are you all right?" It was Johns.

Faintly — too faintly — Dalton heard a cough, like a man trying to take a breath — or get rid of it. Dalton spoke with alarm: *"Gagnan*, do you have a sonar fix on those two?"

"Not sure. There's been an oil eruption, sounds like. Tracking now," Lansing responded. The sub was already lifting, its lights sweeping across the deck.

"Give us a lift!" Dalton and Kante swam to the sub and clung to the stern cleats near the cowled propellers. The blades whirred like dynamos, drowning phone transmission.

The sub ran hard for only a moment, then slowed. "Oil ahead!" Lansing warned. "I see someone — Johns, I think."

Dalton and Kante swam quickly to the diver. He was blackened with oil, groping blindly toward the light. Behind him, oil erupted steadily from a crack in the buckled deck. Johns' voice was fuzzy and distant, muffled by the oil coating his helmetphone: "I'm all right — find Sal!"

Sonar pings from *Gagnan* rang, volume-filtered, in Dalton's ears. The pings ceased, and Lansing

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announced, "I've got him — ten meters up — just to starboard!" Dalton followed the swiveling spotlight, targeted on a diver figure above them, twirling slowly like a leaf on a gentle updraft. "He's over your ceiling," Lansing warned.

It would be dangerous to go after him, but Dalton saw no choice. "Stay here, Gary!" he ordered Kante. He kicked upward, cautiously, toward the turning figure. The depth alarm beeped and flashed in his helmet as he passed his safe decompression limit. Breathing heavily, he tucked and reversed to feet-upward attitude, groping at the oil-covered Sal. His fingers slipped into the man's harness straps. He jabbed his buoyancy-vent and kicked downward, hard, hauling the man back toward the deck. Oil obliterated his clear view, and when the alarm fell silent he shouted to Kante to help guide him to the sub. "But stay clear!" he said.

Kante was quickly at his aid, and after a confusing effort they brought Sal into the lockout well, and Kante hoisted him into the diving chamber from above. Minutes were lost while Dalton groped and tugged Johns into the well also; then he climbed up into the chamber and gratefully cracked open his blinded visor. He blinked, got out of Johns' way; and when all four were inside, he smacked the intercom switch with his fist and yelled, "Hit it, Tom — back to *Lair* — NOW!"

The sub shuddered and swung about. Kante managed to maneuver himself to open Sal's visor, and he established that the man was alive and semiconscious. Dalton was relieved at that — but Sal was not out of danger yet. And Dalton himself could be in trouble; he waited nervously for the tingle or the itch that might signify the first symptons of bends. So far ... he felt nothing, he hoped.

When the sub trembled to a halt, there was a pair of divers waiting outside to take Sal to the habitat. Two more assisted Dalton. By the time he emerged dripping and oily in *Lair's* wetroom, Sal had been stripped of his gear and moved into the adjacent recompression chamber with Miller.

Dalton was helped out of his suit, and Jenny Cowen immediately attached an ultrasonic tracer to his chest. She studied the readout for a moment, then her eyes flickered to meet his. "You've got second-degree bubbles, Robert. Do you want to hustle into the chamber, or go on hi-ox?"

"Give me the mask," Dalton muttered, glancing about the crowded wetroom at the concerned faces. Second degree was minor; he should be safe enough on hi-ox, with a mild anticoagulant shot.

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"What's going on in there?" he demanded, tossing his head toward the recompression chamber. "Somebody ask Miller what the hell's going on!"

Andrea Thomas was already asking, but with Cowen clanking around gas cylinders, he missed the reply. "What'd he say? Damnit, Jenny, will you stop —?"

Cowen stuck a respirator mask in his face. He grabbed it away in annoyance. Thomas shook her head and bent to the intercom for another moment. She brightened. "He'll be okay, Jim thinks. Apparently he did not embolize — but he had third-degree bubbles, down to second, now. They're at —" she leaned to read a gauge — "eighteen atmospheres, and Tim's on hi-ox."

Dalton slumped in relief and put his mask on. He would be breathing five-percent oxygen for a while, rather than the one-and-one-third percent normal at this depth. Jenny gripped his arm, and he held still while she gave him the anti-coagulant shot. Miller's voice squawked on the intercom, saying that he thought Sal had mainly been stunned by the gush of oil. "He's alert, now, but I'm not letting him take off his mask to talk."

The tension in the wetroom eased after that, but not for long. With the concern for Sal diminished, everyone was soon heatedly discussing the situation outside. How bad was it? Could they finish the job ... was the habitat safe ... should they pull up and leave before a more serious accident occurred? Dalton gave them a few minutes, while he shivered in his thermal undersuit. He muttered gratefully to Cowen, who brought him a robe; then he pulled down his mask and interrupted: "Will someone please call Lansing and the tug pilot and fill them in! Phelps and Benson, you're already suited — go out for a ride with *Gagnan* and *find out* what kind of shape we're in. And meanwhile, we've got some oil to clean up here!" The last was an understatement — the wetroom was a black-streaked, tarry mess, and so, no doubt, was *Gagnan*.

He shoved his mask back on and looked at Cowen for a verdict. "Getting there," she said, studying the monitor on his bloodstream. He stared darkly, intently at the tracer readout, wishing that he could vanquish the bubbles by willpower alone.

Phelps and Benson came back half drenched with oil, and bearing a distressing report. The tanker had apparently sagged or contorted amidships, probably because that section had been unloaded first, with the oil being replaced by denser seawater. The result was more buckling, considerably more

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leakage, and — worst of all — a break in the main pipeline, directly behind the offloading terminus. There was no way now to hook the barge feedline into the still-intact distribution circuit.

"Can we repair it?" Dalton asked.

Hanging on the wetroom ladder, staring up at Dalton, Phelps looked bedraggled and discouraged. He shrugged, shaking his head. "Maybe, if things were going right. But there's massive leaking all around the terminus area, now, and you'd have to work right in the stuff."

"Can't we do that?" Dalton demanded.

Phelps looked startled. He rested his cheek on one arm. "And wind up like Sal or get torn up on that decking? Damn me if I know how we'd fix it, anyway."

"Think on it," Dalton said. Phelps blinked and lurched past him, headed for the shower — leaving Dalton to worry the problem alone.

The ocean outside the lab portal was silent in the external floodlights — green mist over solid steelwork, and the still forms of *Truck 2* and *Gagnan*, where Lansing was probably now sleeping. The only oil visible in this direction was a single careless streak on the viewpane itself. Dalton was sipping coffee in the gloom, when Cowen entered and joined him in staring outside. "Tim will be coming out of the chamber in a few minutes," she said.

"Uh-huh." Dalton was glad, of course, but what was really on his mind was the rest of the crew. Would they want to continue the job? And if came to it, did he have the right to try to persuade them? The danger, after all, was no longer hypothetical — and it was likely to become worse. One man, already, could have lost his life. For what — to humor Diving Chief Dalton? Most of them would be quite happy to pick up and leave. And, not so long ago, he would have agreed.

"Don tells me you want to try repairing the pipeline," Cowen said.

"I'm considering it." He was rather glad that she wanted to talk. "They said that the decking under the habitat appeared sound — so in that respect we're safe enough, and Jim can lift quickly if he has to. As for working — it's riskier, but I guess we'll have to decide whether or not the stakes are worth it."

"The stakes," Cowen repeated. "Now that's what I want to talk about. I know you mean the oilspill — yes, somebody should try to stop it; there's the coast to think about, and the plankton and so on. But I don't think that's what you *really* mean. What about you, Robert

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Dalton — what are *your* stakes?" She looked at him intently, with rare frank curiosity. "*Why are you so goddamn determined?*"

He almost laughed, flattered by her inquisitiveness. This Jenny was an attractive woman, he decided — leaner, more muscled than Marnie. When she showed interest in him as a person, he found that he actually liked her. "It's our job, Jenny," he said, knowing that would exasperate her. He turned serious. "Look. Maybe we can't prevent a disaster here, but we can certainly keep it from being five times worse."

"That's not what I asked, damnit."

He pursed his lips, accepting the rebuke. "All right. Me. But it's not just me — it's all of us here. I didn't want to accept this assignment, either, you know."

"Look," she said wearily, "if Bronell threatened to fire you, just say so, I can understand that."

He was startled. "That was part of it, yes. Funny, I'd almost forgotten. Jenny, when was the last time you went mainside — or felt any desire at all to leave the station? How often do you think about your life *before* you came to the station?"

Jenny shrugged. "The point being that we are happy here, and why should we want to leave?"

"Not just happy. It's so much a home, now, that we're *afraid* to leave. It was Bronell who first got me thinking about it. He's new enough that he still has something of an outsider's perspective. The station's not his only world — not yet — and maybe *we* ought to think about that, before we forget that we live on the bottom of a whole ocean, not just in a concrete complex." He looked out the port again, at the misty green emptiness, and realized that for the first time it was clear in his mind that he believed it. "All of this is home, Jenny — the station's just an oasis. We live here, and if we're not responsible for it, who will be?"

Blood was thudding in his skull like a broken drun. He wanted to say something persuasive — but his brain was tired, he needed sleep. He rather wished that Marnie were here. "We'll put it to the group. All right?"

Cowen nodded slowly, but her expression gave no answer.

The work site was a vision of Hell on another world: a garrison of oil-stained divers in a grotesque, murkily lighted wilderness, standing among fumaroles of billowing blackness. The clear plastic wrap around Dalton's helmet and visor had little folds and airpockets; it was an imperfect window on the vision. But that would not matter long. Where he was going, he would

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see nothing but oil. He shifted his weight, testing the feel of the lead-soled boots he was now wearing.

The sheared pipeline was not going to be repaired. Instead, the mating adapter would be removed from its present location and — he hoped — rewelded into the pipeline beyond the break, beyond the worst of the deck leaks. The idea, when Dalton proposed it, had not met with overwhelming support; Phelps, alone, had granted him that it might be workable. But, with the understanding that if this failed the mission would be terminated, the other divers had agreed to try it.

Dalton made his final communication with Phelps: "We'll take it slowly, and don't forget the signals. Ready?"

Together, they lifted the bank of cylinders and the torch and stepped carefully into the curtain of flowing oil. The murk enwreathed Dalton at once, coating his visor and lacing about his arms and legs like syrup. The sounds in his helmetphone dropped to a scrambled mutter, and his breath and the gasflow hiss suddenly seemed thick and noisy. He strained in every muscle to sense his way, to avoid stumbling or catching his feet on the broken decking.

Groping ahead with one hand and carrying the torch bank with the other, he found the pipeline — then shuffled his way to the right and felt the swollen bulge of the valve and mating adapter. Phelps' hand bumped his. He spent a minute getting a clear feel of the shapes and sizes before him; then he felt the torch in Phelps' hand and recognized that his partner was ready to start. He reached to find the spot on which Phelps had placed the template-brace for the torch — and then he drew back and slapped Phelps' arm twice.

Phelps began cutting.

The torch grumbled and sputtered away at the metal, throwing the faintest glimmer of light through the oil, but mostly noticeable for its hissing, bubbling shock waves. The cutting was a terribly slow process requiring frequent stops to check the cut with a small metal probe. They spelled one another wielding the torch, but even the rest periods were fatiguing — the strain of the constant blind groping and remaining balanced and alert in the strange darkness.

An eerie reflection on the faceglass stole his attention: his eyes, in the dim red glow of the inner-helmet gauge display. He was growing warm. When Phelps handed him the torch again, he had to stoop to follow the line of the cut as it curved under the pipe. His movements were loggy, his breath hard; his head drummed in the warmth. Sweat rolled from his eyebrows, ran saltily between his lips.

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When he had cut to the middle of the underside, he nudged Phelps. They moved awkwardly, stumbling, to the other side of the pipeline — then resumed work. Eventually, Dalton realized the extent of his difficulty. He was panting heavily, and he chuckled that he had been so slow to recognize CO_2 buildup. He leaned against the pipe and breathed deeply and slowly and wished that he could wipe his forehead. He heard a garbled murmur over the gasflow hiss, which might have been Phelps trying to speak to him, and he chuckled again, thinking how strange it was that he should be so warm.

The torch sputtered, slipped and fell against his arm and dropped to the deck, extinguished. He clung to the pipe, blood pounding in his head, his lungs unable to vanquish the ache in his sides — and he waited for the crawling, burning torch pain which did not come. The torch had missed burning him ... why was he so scared?

Bits of warning fell together in his spinning mind. Overwork ... air hunger ... narcosis. He blinked sweat from his eyes. Narcosis, Jesus. The dizziness, the giddiness, the nervous exhaustion of working in the oil — how had he failed to notice? *Steady now!*

He continued leaning on the pipe, breathing slowly, deliberately, not fighting the density of the air, until the ache in his chest subsided and the blood slowed its race in his skull. When Phelps slapped his arm four times in query, he gripped the man's arm in return, delaying his answer; and finally he slapped back four times: OK. He felt better, though still too warm, and as he knelt and groped to retrieve the torch he told himself: *work slowly, leisurely.*

When the cut, finally, was finished, he carried the gear away with his unseen partner. He stumbled and was glad to feel hands gripping him, guiding him to safety. Someone tore the protective clear-wrap from his helmet, and suddenly through the streaked faceplate he saw light and the figures of his fellow divers.

"Thanks," he croaked. "Don — ho, Don — you there?"

Phelps was a black-tarred mess beside him, receiving similar attention, and his voice filled Dalton's helmet, dull but loud. "I'm here. A bit narked, I think."

"Thought maybe," Dalton said. He explained to the others as coherently as he could what they had accomplished, and how they had narcotized. "It was the CO_2 that helped nark us, I think. We'll have to go back in to free the deck mounts," he said, licking his lips, still a bit groggy.

"The hell you will," a sharp voice answered.

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Who —?

"Cowen here, Bob. You two sound done in. Overdone. We've plenty of able bodies to finish the job."

She was right, he realized; it would be foolish to go back in, and yet here he was, ready to do it. He was still narked, still tired. "Right," he said. "We'll stand by to assist. You take charge, but keep out of the oil yourself."

Cowen called for Kante and Johns to enter the oil and for Lansing to bring *Gagnan* in for the pickup. In a relatively short while, the mounts were cut and *Gagnan* backed away, the heavy mating adapter clutched in its mechanical arms — and its nose entirely covered with oil. Two divers hurried to rip off the plastic tied across its viewport, to restore at least partial vision to Lansing.

The adapter was moved to its new spot, cleaned as much as possible; and attached to the newly cut pipe, with Phelps directing the welding. By the end of the workday the mating adapter was secured, a feedline was connected from the barge, and — to their tired but exuberant surprise — oil was successfully pumped.

Four divers remained to work a while longer, and the others retired for a well-deserved rest.

Dalton was too tired to sleep, after an almost hopeless attempt at cleaning his divesuit. Hot spray, detergent, and scrubbing notwithstanding, the suits and the breathing gear were still black with the stubborn stuff, and the entire habitat smelled of oil. After a hot meal most of the crew had dropped limply into their bunks, but Dalton went back to the lab and sat moodily by the portal. The ocean seemed clearer than before, but now a few oil springs were visible at the dark edge of the floodlight field. Around him in the lab the curved and worn-enameled walls gleamed dimly with light from the corridor and sounded faintly with whispers of circulating air and crackling of heating elements.

Circulating air. Helium, nitrogen, oxygen, carbon dioxide. Strange, Dalton thought, and foolish. They were so accustomed to depth-balanced gas mixtures and efficient tools for their normal work that they had simply forgotten how close to the body's limits they worked. It was the damned oil — nerve-wracking, so hard to function in — and they had forgotten a simple fact, that fatigue and high CO_2 in the blood can make even balanced nitrogen levels narcotic. And that had made the difference.

They had forgotten, but now they knew and could work in it. Assuming, of course, that they *would*. It wasn't clear to him just

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how reassured the others were by their success.

He watched the last four divers return, tailed by *Gagnán*, and listened to them clank about in the wetroom and finally move up to the wardroom to eat. Eventually Jenny stuck her head into the lab and joined him with a sandwich and coffee.

"We filled a barge and a half," she said, weariness showing in her movements as she set her coffee on the lab bench and faced him. She pulled her robe snug, shivering. Though the lab air was warm and humid, the green aura from the port cast a chilling glow about the compartment. "No more buckling of the decks that we noticed."

"How is your team holding up?"

She tilted her head to the portal glow and seemed to be looking past him, outside. "Tired."

"I know that."

"Yes." She sipped her coffee and smiled. A silent, smiling figure in the undersea dusk. And a woman: again, the fact struck him pleasantly, and he wondered why it had taken so long. "They want to keep working till we finish." She stared. "I don't think you realize how much you impressed them, Bob — your plunge into that muck. Don they expected to do something crazy like that, but not you. Andrea said she always took you for the cautious type."

Dalton watched her silently, waiting.

"They really believe in this crazy job, I think. Me too, but don't tell anyone I said that." She sipped again. "I must be tired, Bob — even your ravings are starting to make sense."

He nodded, relaxing slightly, not hiding his smile. It was good to hear, but he was so tired, he hardly knew what to think.

Cowen finished her sandwich. She put a hand gently on his arm; it was a slight, friendly gesture, which coming to him from Jenny conveyed an unprecedented warmth. "Hadn't you better get some sleep?" she asked softly. Her eyes focused on him with close, honest concern — and he answered with an impulsive grin. He patted her hand, hoisted himself, and trudged with weary satisfaction to his bunk.

By the time the third barge-train had arrived, Lansing announced his estimate that perhaps a third of the ship's stupendous cargo had been offloaded successfully, while about half that amount had already leaked into the ocean. "We can't call it a complete victory, whatever happens," he said, "but it's a piece of one." Dalton, personally, was inclined to consider their accomlishment more highly — but at the same time he admitted to

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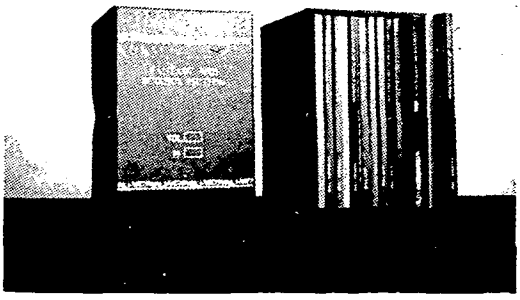
some nervousness about the precedent they were setting here. His people, perhaps, had better get used to the thought of stranger jobs than this in the future.

Miller finally relayed a message from the VLF receiver: "Sea conditions have improved, topside, and a surface team is on the way with oil-company divers. They should be here and ready to take over by 1200 hours tomorrow."

That provoked considerable discussion, even as work progressed. Dalton found himself gently excluded from several informal huddles, but when a consensus was reached, he was asked to personally transmit the team's reply. "You do it, Jenny," he said. His part, he felt, had been done.

A radio buoy was unreeled on a surface cable and contact established as the ships arrived overhead. Cowen sat before the communications set in *Lair's* cockpit and, glancing wryly over her shoulder at Dalton, delivered the message in a businesslike tone: "Thanks for that offer of assistance, Topside. Don't know who sent you all this way, though, but we're doing just fine. Stick around — maybe we can bargain for some food and fuel while you clean up the oil on your end."

She grinned with great satisfaction and cuffed Dalton good-naturedly as he listened for the reply.



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Phyllis Eisenstein's new story about a writer of pulp fiction named Sam Haskell is a first-rate addition to a small but fascinating sub-genre that might be called science fiction stories about science fiction.

In Answer To Your Call

by PHYLLIS EISENSTEIN

Sam Haskell woke with a numb right hand and a taste of garbage in his mouth. When he lifted his head, pain stabbed between his shoulder blades, and his arm began to ache where the metal-rimmed keys of the ancient L.C. Smith had marked it deeply. As he leaned back, his chair made a sound like the feeling in his joints. He reached for the bottle, then blurrily realized it was empty. *Getting too old for this kind of crap*, he thought, *deadline or no deadline*. A glance at the pages stacked beside the typewriter showed "THE END" scrawled prominently on the uppermost sheet. He recalled putting his head down for just a moment to let the relief of completion wash over him — by his watch, that was five hours ago. He had missed the morning mail pick-up; the next was early in the evening. His editor's March issue could wait that long. He scraped the chair back, intending to fall across the bed for another dose of oblivion.

A young woman sat on the bed, a young woman dressed all in black: suede boots, close-fitting slacks, elaborately tooled belt, and silky turtleneck pullover — not an unusual costume for the local university community, though of finer quality than average. She had one knee bent, her hands clasped about it, and she was watching him with a faint smile.

Five hours earlier, he had been alone in his one-room apartment.

Abruptly wide awake, he glanced over his shoulders, left and right, in search of some other intruder. He saw none. The door was double-bolted, as usual. He leaped to his feet, toppling the chair as he lunged for the dresser; the second drawer almost came out in his hands when he wrenched it open. Under a pile of socks he found the revolver, loaded, waiting,

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the metal cold to his touch. He clutched it with shaking fingers; he had never aimed it at another human being.

"Who are you?" he croaked, the words distorted by the dryness of his mouth. "How the hell did you get in here?"

She hadn't moved, had only watched him calmly, her head cocked to one side. "This is a rather peculiar welcome," she murmured.

"I asked you a question, lady!"

Shrugging, she said, "You called me and I came."

"I didn't call anyone."

She rose, and in the shifting contours of muscle limned by her snug clothing, there were neither soft curves nor sharp angles. She moved like a lioness, all fluid steel, and her gaze met his, unblinking, and penetrated to his marrow. "What silly game is this, my dear?"

"I'd like to know that, too, lady. Stop right where you are."

She frowned. "Don't you know me?"

"No."

"No?"

Her puzzlement seemed so genuine that he felt forced to sift his memory for those dark eyes and fine, high-bridged nose, that close-cropped chestnut hair. He came up empty-handed. "I've never seen you before in my life."

She stepped toward him again, and only when he raised the gun to chest height did she pause. "I can't believe you've been mind-wiped. Your eyes — your eyes look all right."

"What about my eyes?" he said.

"They're still blue. There's no known way in the Universe to prevent pigment migration during mind-wipe."

He almost smiled at that. "You seem to have read my work."

"Your work?"

"I've probably used mind-wipe in half a dozen stories. In that one, too, I think." He nodded toward the manuscript by the typewriter. "Did you read it while I was asleep, instead of burglarizing the place?"

"I am not a burglar."

"Then what the hell are you?"

"I am Arch-Major Sharon Stuart, late of Her Majesty's Fifth Commando Brigade, cashiered at the end of the Ziron War and currently serving Lord Alarion as a mercenary."

Haskell's lips compressed tightly for a moment; then he said, "And how did you get into my room?"

"I was in Alarion's court, making my final obeisance, and I heard you calling me from far away. I turned, took a step toward your voice, and then I experienced a sensation of utter dislocation. I was passing through a warp in space, and on the other side I found

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myself here, with you. You were sleeping, and I decided to wait quietly until you woke."

Haskell shook his head ruefully. "What purpose do you think this sham will serve?"

"Sham?"

"Yes, *sham*. Surely you don't think for a moment that I am going to believe that one of my own characters is paying me a social call! I invented Sharon Stuart, and no one knows better than I do that she isn't real!"

"I am quite real, Mal. Quite real."

"Mal?" Haskell's eyebrows rose at the sound of that name. "Don't tell me I'm supposed to be Malcolm Sanderson, intrepid adventurer of the spaceways?"

"Well ... who else could you be?"

"I *am* Sam Haskell, writer of pulp fiction."

Slowly her gaze slipped downward from his face to the gun in his hand. At her sides, her hands curled into fists. "Who could have done this to you?" she whispered. "Who hates us enough to erase your memory of our life together?" She looked up again, and there was pain in her eyes. "Oh, my dear —"

"Turn if off, sweetheart. You're a pretty good actress, but I doubt if anyone will ever film my stuff."

"Oh, Mal, Mal, this is madness!" She scanned the room, as if seeing it for the first time; her gaze caught briefly at the door and the window. "Are we locked in?"

"Only from the inside."

"Where is this place?"

He sighed in exasperation. "This place is my cheap and somewhat shabby apartment in Hyde Park, a neighborhood on the south side of the City of Chicago, in the County of Cook, the State of Illinois, the United States of America, planet Earth, otherwise known as Sol Three, satellite of a very nondescript G-type star. Does that satisfy you, Arch-Major Stuart?"

"Earth? Fabled Earth?"

"Oh, come *on*. You remind me of what a hack writer I really am."

"Is the window transparent?"

"It may not be clean, but the last time I checked, you could still see through it."

"May I look out?"

"You can look ... but you'll only see the brick wall next door. And the window is nailed shut."

She twitched aside the grimy shade and peered out, contemplating the view for some moments. "How long have you been here?" she asked.

"In Hyde Park, all my life. In this apartment, about five years."

She glanced at him over her shoulder. "You've lived many places, but never Earth."

Once again he shook his head. "I can't figure you out. If you really

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believe what you're saying, then one of us is crazy. On the other hand, if you're just faking all of this to slip out of an attempted robbery charge .... all right, the door is over there. I won't try to stop you. I haven't got a damn thing worth stealing except the typewriter, and I'll bet you could do a hell of a lot better than that in some other apartment. If I never see you again, that's okay, and I want you to know that I am really flattered that you're so familiar with my work. Keep on buying it. Or stealing it, if that's what you do. Go on, get out of here." He waved toward the door with his empty hand.

She stood motionless beside the window. "There must be doctors who can cure you," she said softly.

He lowered the gun then, and the muscles of his forearm pulsed raggedly in relief. "Go on, go out the door. I won't shoot you."

She raised her left arm, pushed the sleeve back to reveal a silver bracelet. "You need help. Let me call for the local authorities."

"On your two-way wrist radio?"

"Something of the sort."

"I'd like to see that trick."

She fingered the bracelet, which he now saw was covered with a fine pattern of filigree. She frowned and whispered her name like an invocation, and she fingered it again. At last she said, "We must be enclosed in a nonconductant field."

"Doesn't work, huh?"

She clutched the bracelet-circled wrist with her other hand. "Is this a trap? Is it some sadistic game?" She looked up at the ceiling and shouted, "Is someone watching us this very moment?"

Involuntarily, he looked up, too, and in that instant of his distraction, she crossed the space that separated them, flung her arms about his waist, and held on as if he were the only hope in a drowning world. "I won't lose you!" she cried.

He stood awkward in her embrace, the gun dangling from his fingers. Her body was warm against his, her hair soft beside his cheek. For a heartbeat, he could almost imagine that she was truly Sharon come to life, the heroine of a thousand interstellar adventures, the ideal that he had molded for himself through countless hours of writing for a quarter cent a word. For a heartbeat, he felt that he must still be sleeping, and then the weight of the gun in his hand reminded him that he was very much awake.

"What do you want?" he demanded, but softly, because she was so near his lips.

"Nothing more than my Mal," she whispered, and then she pressed her mouth to his.

He felt light-headed kissing her; too many months had passed since

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he'd held a woman in his arms, and he could not force himself to break the sweet contact. At last, she drew back, but only an inch or two.

"I know that kiss," she murmured.

The gun scraped her shoulder as he pulled her close, but she didn't seem to notice. Only when they sank to the bed did it leave his hand to lie beside the pillow, an incongruous spectator to their swift, silent coupling.

Afterward, as he dozed in her arms, he had an old, familiar dream: he dreamed he wandered in darkness, calling out for help. In the distance, a woman's voice answered, but no matter how fast he walked — and sometimes he seemed to be flying instead — he could not reach her. Finally he glimpsed her, a dim silhouette in the light of three crescent moons, but just as he raised his arm to wave a glad greeting, he woke.

The woman who called herself Sharon Stuart stretched beside him and then sat up. "Come outside with me, Mal, and show me what sort of place Earth is."

He studied the smooth, pale skin of her thigh, stroked it with his fingertips. His anger was gone now, and his exasperation, replaced by an amused acquiescence to the game. "You'll find it rather primitive," he said.

She began to dress. "For esthetic reasons? Like a wilderness preserve?"

"No, not like that." Before pulling on his own clothes, he sealed his story manuscript into a stamped eveelope; he noticed the gun then, still lying on the bed, and he carefully shut it in the second drawer of the dresser, under the pile of socks.

Outside, the fall day was windy, and cinders, dandelion seeds, and newspapers swirled about them as they walked. Across the street, a crowd of screaming children played on the steps of the ramshackle synagogue.

"Rather a prosaic-looking place," she said, nodding toward the shabby frame buildings to their left, toward the lawns where glass mingled with grass in a twinkling mosaic, toward the potholed street and crumpled sidewalk. "Is this a slum?"

"Beginning to be," he muttered. "There are nicer areas."

"I see that the locals can only afford ground cars." She indicated the vehicles lining both sides of the thoroughfare.

"We call them automobiles," Haskell told her. "Based on the internal-combustion engine. Their fuel is gasoline, a petroleum product."

"Internal combustion? But you have broadcast power." She pointed toward the nearest rooftop,

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which sprouted several tall antennas.

"Television reception. Two-dimensional entertainment, projected by a cathode ray tube on a glass screen coated with phosphors. Our power — electrical power — comes through cables either above or below ground."

Her eyebrows lifted. "When you said primitive, you weren't joking."

They reached the corner, where the mailbox stood in a patch of weeds. He dropped the envelope in. "It's a very dull place, compared to Phydra or Erinax II."

She looked all about her, turning slowly to scrutinize every detail of the block. She looked up into the sky, squinting against the sunlight. "Earth," she said. "The cradle of civilization. Somehow, I expected more — soaring towers, floating palaces." Something in the distant sky caught her attention, and she shaded her eyes to see it more clearly. A faint drone accompanied the silver birdshape, increasing in volume as the plane grew nearer and passed almost overhead on its low approach to Midway Airport. "Is that ... a propeller-driven aircraft?" Her tone was incredulous.

"It's a pretty standard form of transportation."

"But ... it's so inefficient."

"Well, it's about the best we have, at least commercially. The military has jets, of course."

She watched the plane disappear into the west. "Surely antigravity is cheap enough. Unless there's some absurd law against it."

"There isn't any antigravity."

"You should import it, then."

"No, I mean it hasn't been invented yet."

Her expression was puzzled. "Of course it has. It's been around for centuries. It was invented here on Earth."

He shook his head.

She laughed, hesitantly at first, and then easier, as if she suddenly realized she was being teased. "Mal, you and I have both used antigrav a thousand times. We even had private belts on Jannick's World."

"I've never been on Jannick's World, and there's no such thing as antigravity. Not in the year 1952."

Her whole body stiffened as if she had been given an electric shock. "1952? What system would that be?"

"The one commonly used by Western Civilization: Anno Domini."

"You mean the Christian Era?"

"The very same."

She raised a hand to her lips. "Have we come through a warp in time as well as space? Thousands of parsecs ... and thousands of years?"

Haskell leaned against the mailbox. "I don't know about you," he said, "but I've lived here all my life

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and haven't ever been more than fifty miles from this city."

"Mal, you've been light-years from this city."

"No."

"You've been to Altair, to the Core, to the Lesser Magellanic Cloud! You've fought battles that ranged farther than this planet's orbit."

"I was 4F during the war."

"You skippered a dreadnought during the war."

"I meant World War Two, the one that happened on Earth a few years ago. I didn't skipper anything and never have. Earth doesn't have spaceships. I hope she will someday, but I'll certainly never command one of them. I just write about the stuff."

"Mal ...."

"And I'm not Mal. Really I'm not. I wish I were. I'm sorry, but I think the game is over."

Her head bent slowly, as if under a heavy weight, and, eyes staring down at the buckled sidewalk beneath her feet, she rubbed stiff fingers against the back of her neck. She looked bewildered. She looked like she needed comfort, and Haskell wanted to reach out to her, take her in his arms, hold her close and tell her it didn't matter, none of it mattered. But he did nothing because now he had the chilling feeling that he had misjudged her all along, that it hadn't been a game at all but a delusion — a well-structured delusion based on the product he had spent his life creating.

Finally, she looked up at him. "Sam," she said. "Sam ... show me ... what did you call it? Hyde Park."

He smiled and took her hand. "There are indeed a few things to see."

They walked. They passed away from the modest shabbiness of frame dwellings and moved on toward the faded splendor of the twenties — huge, rambling old buildings badly in need of renovation. They nosed into dark, cramped bookstores and narrow, neighborhood bakeries. They watched the local commuter train pull into the 57th Street Station, then ducked under the trestle and headed for the Museum of Science and Industry.

In the great domed hall, where vintage mono- and biplanes hung by steel wires from the ceiling, they paused. Masses of schoolchildren eddied by them, chattering and giggling and, when they thought their teachers weren't looking, sliding on the highly polished floor. The souvenir counter was doing its usual land-office business in miniature ceramics, key chains, ashtrays, and pamphlets bearing the museum's imprint.

"I come here often," Haskell

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said. "Sometimes for inspiration, sometimes just for fun."

In the few hours before closing time, he could only show her the highlights of the museum: the steel exhibit, the telephones, the educational television studio, the electricity demonstration. She asked few questions but looked and listened everywhere. The technology of Earth opened up before her, and she frowned much.

On the way out, they stopped at the huge, cylindrical periodic table of elements. Here, every element had its own niche, lit by a small fluorescent tube, marked with the name and atomic weight and number. The radioactives alone were not represented by ore samples, bottles of gas, or commercial products. She traced the bottom row to the last entry, element 98, Californium, and she stood there long, fingering the glass that separated her from the empty niche.

They were the last to leave, and the guards closed the museum doors behind them. From the broad marble steps they watched the sun sink among the low buildings to the west, and then they went down to the lake shore, to sit on the embankment and see the stars come out.

"Sam," she said, "what is it, exactly, that you write about?"

He smiled. "You seem to know that as well as I do."

"You write about Mal and me. About ... the future."

"It's not much of a living, but, yes, that's what I do. I write science fiction."

She stared out across the dark water, at the empty horizon. "Not *fiction*, Sam. Mal and I are real. The Ziron War was real. Will be real." She turned to him, her face dim in the glow of the newly kindled streetlights behind her. "Sam, you've tapped the future somehow. Through rapport with Mal, I think; he *is* you, Sam, and you are him. I can't tell the two of you apart."

"I've always thought of him as a vast improvement on myself."

"No. You look alike, you talk alike — more so than identical twins. The odds against genetic duplication, aside from twinning, are astronomical, but the number of people who have lived throughout history is also astronomical. That one chance in a quintillion for a genetic repeat could have happened by now ... by *my* now. It *has* happened, Sam. You're in rapport with Mal, transcribing his experiences. Somehow that rapport has opened a gate between your time and mine, and I've come through at your call. There is no other possible explanation."

Haskell rubbed at his chin with two fingers. "If I opened a gate via rapport with Mal, why didn't *he*

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come through it?"

"Obviously because you wanted *me*."

He looked away from her then, but her face was clear in his mind's eye, and the memory of her flesh was in his hands. "Maybe I did. But even identical twins don't have the kind of rapport you're talking about."

"Of course they do. That's a well-known fact."

"Not in my day, it isn't."

"Well, this is a fairly primitive day, isn't it?"

He closed his eyes. He didn't know what to think. Was she mad, or was the truth as wild as any of his stories?

A cool wind began to blow from the lake, and it roused him from his reverie. The sky was quite dark, the brightest stars outshining the glow of city lights. "It's getting late. We'd better go."

"The night is lovely."

"It's not a good idea to be here after dark."

She shrugged. "There are two of us. We could handle anything that came up."

"I don't feel quite as confident about that as you do."

She touched his hand lightly. "All right, we'll go back to your apartment and relax for a while. Then you can send me back."

"Send you back?"

"You brought me here — you can send me back."

He gripped her hand tightly. "I suppose so." He stood, pulled her to her feet. "I don't really know how I'm going to do it."

She stepped close to kiss his cheek, and his arms slipped about her waist, fitting there as if she had been molded for him. "We'll puzzle it out, Sam. I have to go, you know. I have responsibilities waiting for me. And Mal."

"And Mal," he murmured.

Arm in arm, they ambled across the beach.

Briefly, he considered steering her toward Billings Hospital, toward the kind and experienced psychiatrists who would probably clap her in a room with barred windows. But he could not help thinking of himself: mysteriously transported to the Seventeenth Century, locked in a madhouse, would *he* ever be able to talk his way out? She had no purse, no identification of any kind, but what if her clothing were made of an unknown fabric, what if the silvery bracelet were an undiscovered alloy? The skeptic in him believed she was mad; the dreamer wanted to believe that she was Sharon.

They walked toward his apartment. They passed dark alleys, shadowy doorways, vacant buildings, the inky mystery beneath the railroad trestle. She seemed drawn to those places, lingering in their

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silence, while he wanted to hurry from streetlight to streetlight. Vandals had been busy smashing the cream-colored globes in recent days; every third or fourth light was out. It seemed to Haskell that their route darkened progressively, try as he might to pick a well-lit path; nor were there any other pedestrians abroad, though the hour was not particularly late. They were still some blocks from his apartment when he heard the footsteps.

She looked back over her left shoulder. "Someone is following us," she murmured.

He stepped up their pace, fairly dragging her along by one arm.

"You don't have to rush, Sam. It's even odds."

"No, thanks," he said, breathing too hard and too fast. "Come on." He glanced back, trying to be casual about it. He saw two shadowy forms, tall, slender, long-legged, about twenty yards back.

"We can take them."

"No."

"Sam ... are you afraid?"

"Damn right." His breath raked his throat like talons, and the muscles in his legs screamed at the stiff motion he was forcing from them.

"I can handle them both, Sam. You know that."

"No!"

She broke away from him. "I won't run," she said, and she turned to face the strangers.

He skittered to a halt a dozen feet beyond her and froze there, watching the confrontation over one shoulder. The scene was dark and full of tangled shadows. She stood easy, hands on hips, as they approached, and then they reached for her, or she for them. Bodies swooped and tumbled in the dimness; grunts and growls and the thick crunch of pummeled flesh and bone sounded in the melee. A shadow leaped from the fray, and before Haskell could react, it was upon him, bearing him down to the ground, hands hard upon his face. He struggled, clawed at coarse fabric, pushed, and then his assailant was gone and only the rasp of his own ragged breathing remained loud upon the night air.

The woman who called herself Sharon helped him up. "Are you all right?"

Shakily, he dusted himself off. His knee throbbed where it had struck the sidewalk in his fall, but otherwise he was whole. Two men lay limp on the grass near his feet. He stared down at them. "Are they dead?"

"Does it matter?"

He looked at her face, saw the glitter of her eyes, reflections of a distant streetlight. He saw that it didn't matter to her. He caught her arm. "If they're dead, we have to call the police."

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She stirred one body with her foot, then the other. Both groaned. "They're alive. But they won't feel very well for the next few days. Shall we go?"

"Yes. Yes, that's a good idea." He managed to walk away without glancing back more than three times. The men never moved, and at last, from the other end of the block, they seemed to have merged with the shadows and disappeared completely.

His hands were trembling when they reached his apartment, and he had some trouble inserting the key into the lock. Inside, he headed straight for the pantry, and on the back of a high shelf he found a dusty bottle with a little whiskey in the bottom; he finished it. He felt a little better with that warmth in his stomach.

She sat on the table, next to the typewriter. "Are there many of that sort on the streets of Earth?"

"Too many," he said.

"I presume you didn't know them, that there was no personal vendetta involved."

He shook his head.

"They intended robbery? And perhaps rape?"

"You've got the idea." He sat down in his chair, close to her knees. "You handled it very well."

"I'm trained for that. Perhaps more people on Earth should be trained for it — then the darkness would not be so dangerous."

"Yes, they should."

She reached down and touched his cheek with one hand. "Dear Sam, I can't stay any longer." She bent to kiss his forehead. "It's been strange and wonderful meeting you, but I have a lover waiting for me and a vow to Lord Alarion. You must send me back."

He covered her warm hand with his own. "I don't know how."

"Close your eyes, Sam. Think of Mal and me and our lives in the far future. Think of the gate that only you can open between your time and ours. You can do it, Sam."

He closed his eyes, and he thought of many things — of the nearness of her body, of the taste of cheap whiskey in his mouth, of the shabby, lonely room that would be left to him when she was gone. And at last he thought of Mal, waiting somewhere far away, waiting and perhaps calling for her, just as Sam Haskell had called. He felt pity for Mal then, and in that moment of pity he willed the gate to be open, willed her to be gone through it. He felt her hands withdraw from him. He held his breath.

The moment passed. He opened his eyes, and she was still there.

"I can't do it," he said.

"Of course you can, Sam. Try again. Relax and try again."

He shook his head. "I tried. I really tried. If there were a gate, it

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would have opened then. But there isn't."

"There *is*."

"There is no gate, no Mal, no Sharon. Don't you understand now? It's all a delusion. You're a beautiful woman and a highly skilled fighter, but that doesn't make you Sharon. You need help, you need a doctor's help —"

She bent close to him again. "There *is* a gate, Sam. Think of Mal, waiting, wondering what has happened to me. Think of Lord Alarion's many-spired palace, the vast ballroom with its transparent floor and gem-encrusted hangings, the golden staircase and diamond doors ...." Her voice was smooth and coaxing, almost a lullaby.

"I'm sorry. Whatever your name is, I'm sorry."

She slipped off the table and dropped to her knees before him. "Dear Sam, people are depending on me — I can't betray them. Even a mercenary has some honor."

He stroked her dark hair with both hands. "I'll help you. I won't leave you. We'll work on this together; we'll bring you out of it. Soon you'll forget all about Lord Alarion and Mal."

"Sam! I couldn't stay in this pathetic backwater of Space and Time! You have no ships, no hyper drive — I'd never see the stars again as they really are. The Galaxy, Sam — from the Lesser Magellanic Cloud it's such a glorious sight!"

"I understand how you feel. If somehow I could go, I wouldn't stay here. I'd take a ship and explore the Universe and have the same wild adventures that Mal and Sharon have. I'd see RR Lyrae and Betelgeuse and Beta Cephei. But I can't. I'm Earthbound, except in my imagination. And so are you."

"Come with me, Sam. Open the gate and pass through with me. You and Mal and I — you won't regret it!"

He gripped her shoulders hard. "There is no gate. There never was."

"You haven't tried hard enough, Sam. Down deep, you must not want me to leave. Your will is keeping me here. Sam, please!"

"There is no gate," he whispered.

She stared into his eyes for a long moment, unblinking, her lips set in a tight line; before that compelling gaze, his hands fell away from her. Slowly she rose to her feet. "I accept the compliment implied in your wish that I stay," she said quietly. In a swift smooth motion, then, she turned and crossed the room. Before Haskell could move, she had opened the second dresser drawer and pulled out the revolver. She swung around to face him, the gun held behind

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her back, her free arm extended stiffly, the hand palm-outward to fend him off.

"Sharon, don't do anything rash!"

"I will not stay, Sam."

"Let me find you help, people who will listen to you sympathetically—"

"Will they send me back to my proper time and place in a propeller-driven aircraft?"

"Sharon, put the gun down."

Coolly, she pointed it at him. "Your will binds me here. If you refuse to break that will, I shall have to break it myself."

There was no time to scream. The bullet engulfed his body in heat and blinding light; as he tumbled forward, his frozen eyes perceived one last instant of the world: Sharon, the gun slipping from her open fingers. She seemed insubstantial, transparent, fading. But the rest of everything was fading, too, and darkness covered him before he hit the floor. He didn't even hear the gun strike near his hand.

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THE REAL FINDS WAITING

When I was a little boy, my parents, newly arrived in this country, did not know English and were helpless as far as guiding me in my reading was concerned. My father knew instinctively however, that the material he himself sold for popular consumption — magazines of various sorts — would rot my mind if I allowed any of them to pass through my eyes (I disagreed with him there, but disagreeing with my father never got me anywhere until I had reached college age).

Therefore, he got me a library card and told me to go there and get books. Since there was no one to tell me which books represented the classics, I didn't know which books to avoid.

I came upon Homer's "Iliad" at an early age, and not knowing I was *supposed* to read it, I read it. I couldn't pronounce any of the Greek names easily, but I could tell I had an exciting story there (especially since I had already worked my way through books on the Greek myths).

I particularly liked the translation by William C. Bryant, which I now realize must have been dreadful because he used the Roman rather than the Greek names of the gods. That didn't bother me then, however, and I picked it out of the library again and again, and

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read it over and over. I sometimes began the first verse as soon as I had completed the last verse.

I had it almost memorized. At least, at the height of my infatuation, you might have stood behind me, opened the book to any page and read a single line, and I would have told you where that line came from, what preceded it and what succeeded it.

Alas, that was many years ago, and I can't do that anymore, but I still know the "Iliad" in considerable detail and I know, for instance, that in the 23rd book, which deals with the funeral games in honor of Patroclos, the prize for the shotput contest was the shot itself — a lump of iron.

Here is the passage, in Rouse's translation: "Again Achilles brought out a lump of roughcast iron which that mighty man Eetion used to hurl ... 'Rise, you who wish to contend for this prize. Any man will have enough here to use for five revolving years ... No shepherd or plowman will need to visit the city for iron, there will be plenty at home.'"

Iron? Of what value is iron? And how could a small lump (for even one that was large enough for only a strong man to throw had to be a small lump) last for five years?

It took me a while to solve that mystery. The Greeks at the time of the Trojan War (1200 B.C.) were living in the age of bronze, for the metallurgical techniques required to produce copper and tin from their ores were comparatively simple. The metallurgical techniques for producing iron from its ores were more difficult and were not developed until the centuries immediately following the Trojan War. It wasn't till 800 B.C. that iron became sufficiently common for routine use in military armor and weapons.

In that case, where did Achilles' iron come from? Was it a bit of anachronism on Homer's part, assuming Homer sang his epics several centuries after the Trojan War. No. For one thing, Homer was surprisingly unanachronistic and, for another, iron was indeed available, and was actually used in small quantities since at least 3000 B.C.

How so? Because there was some iron that didn't have to be smelted out of its ore, since it was to be found in the ground as such. In fact, it was better than mere iron. It was mixed with nickel and was the equivalent of alloy steel. It was strong and tough and, used very abstemiously, could make points and edges for tools and weapons made mostly of other materials.

That iron was meteoric, and occasional findings must have been cause for jubilation. There are only some 550 such iron "meteorites" that have

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been found altogether by modern man, these findings coming from all over the world except in areas where early civilizations used metals. There the finds have long ago been gathered up and used.

The largest find presently known is still in the ground in Namibia in Southwest Africa. It is estimated to weigh about 66 tons. The largest known iron meteorite on display is at the Hayden Planetarium in New York and weighs about 34 tons.

Meteorites fall from the sky and were originally "meteoroids" in independent orbit about the Sun. (It took eighteenth-century scientists a long time to believe that matter could fall from the sky, but that is another story for another day.)

Occasionally, fortunately-placed individuals could actually see a meteorite fall from the sky, and land. It could then seem to be a holy object sent by the gods. The "black stone" in the Kaaba, holy to Moslems, may be such a meteorite. The original object of veneration in the temple to Artemis at Ephesus may have been another.

Actually, meteorites are not iron in every case. There are also "stony meteorites," made up of silicate materials rather like that of the crust of the Earth.

For a long time it was considered that stony meteorites were rather unusual and that it was the iron meteorite that was typical. And of the stony meteorites that were discovered, a disproportionately large number were discovered in the 1930s in Kansas.

I can well remember John Campbell, the late editor of *Astounding Science Fiction*, telling me of this very unusual fact and saying that scientists couldn't explain it. I even seem to remember he wrote an editorial on the subject and that a novella was written called "The Gods Hate Kansas" which I think dealt with the matter. It didn't appear in *Astounding*, though, but in the November, 1941, *Startling Stories*.

I could not explain the mystery to John Campbell at the time, because I was not smart enough, but at least I was smart enough to maintain that I didn't think it was a mystery and that the explanation, when it came, would prove simple.

And it did. There just isn't any native iron occurring naturally in the Earth's crust. You see, thanks to the high-oxygen atmosphere, all crustal iron is in the form of oxides and silicates. Any iron you find on Earth's surface now is either man-made or meteoric, and in the days before the Iron Age, any iron you found was meteoric. Iron meteorites were therefore

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easy to recognize if found, for if an object was iron, it was automatically a meteorite.

Not so stony meteorites. Earth's land surface is richer in stones, generally speaking, then in anything else. Whether a stone fell from the sky, or has been there all along as part of the planet, cannot be told at first glance, and no casual human being would even stop to wonder at one more rock. (An expert might suspect, of course, by various outward signs, and confirm the suspicion by a close study of its structure, for even a stony meteorite is likely to have inclusions of metallic iron.)

On the other hand, in an area such as Kansas, where the soil is deep and where surface rocks are virtually non-existent, the presence of any rock is unusual enough to call attention to itself, and stony meteorites are much more easily located there than they would be, let us say, in Vermont.

The gods don't hate Kansas; they hate all places equally. It's just more noticeable in Kansas. Nevertheless, I'm willing to bet that the gods-hate-Kansas idiocy is still peddled and believed by mystery-loving ignoramuses.

But what if a meteoroid is seen to fall and an object is then identified as that just-fallen meteorite? In the majority of cases, it turns out to be a *stony* meteorite. In other words, the association of meteorites with iron, and the assumption that iron is typical of meteorites is just a result of the accident that an iron meteorite is much easier to identify as such than a stony meteorite is.

In actual fact, it may be that 90 percent or more of the meteorites on Earth are stony (or stony-iron, a kind of intermediate classification) and less than 10 percent are iron. This makes sense, actually, since although iron is the commonest of the relatively massive atoms, it is not as common as the lighter atoms making up stone.

Where do the meteorites come from? The consensus seems to be that they are from the asteroid belt. The original cloud of matter out of which the planets of the Solar system formed never managed to form a single planet in the space between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter, perhaps because of the gravitational effect of giant Jupiter (see last month's essay) but may have formed a collection of objects that included several dozen fairly large objects of sub-planetary size.

The largest may have been large enough to melt on formation and to differentiate into objects with iron-rich cores and stony mantles. In the

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early days of the Solar system there may have been collisions of these with smaller pieces so that there would be crater formation. There might also have been shattering and, in view of the low gravitational intensities involved, small asteroidal pieces may have flown off in every direction.

Some of the larger pieces may have, through the accident of random hits by randomly-sized objects, disintegrated altogether, so that even bits of the iron core might, in that case, have flown off in every direction, too.

The final result would be the asteroid belt with orbits of its members having evolved and stabilized over the billions of years into mutual non-interference. Some of the asteroids, however, may have achieved orbits outside the general belt in either direction. A number move within the orbit of Mars and approach the Sun at perihelion more closely than Mars does — or even than Earth and Venus and, in one known case, Mercury does.*

Those intra-Martian asteroids which we spot are the fairly large ones, a kilometer or more across, but there must be numerous such asteroids that are smaller fragments, only meters or even centimeters across, and these are the meteoroids. It is not likely that large objects will hit us because they are so few (though it is not impossible either), but meteoroids would hit us frequently, since there are so many. (There are also dust-sized "micrometeoroids" in countless numbers but they probably originate from disintegrating comets.)

If meteoroids come from the asteroid belt, and if stony ones are more common than iron ones, because the former are made up of lighter atoms, ought there not to be some that are made up of the lightest and most common atoms of all, such as hydrogen, oxygen, carbon, nitrogen, sulfur, and so on. Admittedly, these very light atoms, in themselves or in simple compounds, might be difficult to hold on to by objects with small gravitational fields, but at the low temperatures prevailing in the asteroid belt, especially in the farther reaches away from the Sun and nearer Jupiter, the difficulty should not be an insuperable one.

The answer to that takes us back to meteorites.

Over 90 percent of the stony meteorites contain "chondrules," small round bodies consisting of magnesium-iron silicates, the term coming from a Greek word meaning "grain." Meteorites possessing them are called "chondrites."

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*See *UPDATING THE ASTEROIDS* (*F&SF, August 1974*)

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Every once in a while, a chondrite is found which contains a significant amount of carbon. Not much, only about 2 to 4 percent, but that is a lot for a meteorite, and such objects are called "carbonaceous chondrites."

Only about 20 carbonaceous chondrites have been seen to fall and have then been picked up. One important fall came on September 28, 1969, when an object exploded over the town of Murchison, Australia, and showered fragments over an area of 36 square kilometers (14 square miles). Eventually, 82.7 kilograms (182 pounds) were picked up. In 1950, there was a smaller fall near Murray, Kentucky.

Such carbonaceous chondrites made scientific news because the carbon existed within them in the form of compounds such as fat-like hydrocarbons and, more interesting still, as amino acids, which are the building blocks of proteins. (Do not, however, jump to conclusions. There are unmistakeable chemical signs that such organic compounds were made by processes that did not involve life — at least, not life as we know it.)

The carbonaceous chondrites are divided into three classes: I, II and III, of which I is richest in the light elements and compounds, in carbon, in water, in sulfur, and so on. Except for the very lightest elements, they seem to have an elementary composition similar to that of the Sun. They might be the nearest objects, chemically, between Jupiter and the Sun, that strongly resemble the original cloud of dust and gas out of which the Solar system was formed.

It would seem, then, that the larger asteroids, if they were differentiated, would not only have an iron core and a stony outside, but a light-element crust. Therefore, just as there are more stones than irons, there might be still more carbonaceous objects among the meteroids.

Why, then, do so few carbonaceous chondrites strike the Earth?

Perhaps many do, but whereas the irons and stones are tough and high melting, the carbonaceous chondrites are black objects that easily crumble and pulverize. They are simply too fragile to survive the hot passage through the atmosphere unless they are unusually large.

This is a shame, since the carbonaceous chondrites, because of the complex compounds they contain and their apparent closer approach to the composition of the original nebula, could have a great deal to tell us about the early history of the Solar system and of life.

It may be, though, that carbonaceous chondrites are intrinsically rare and that that's just tough on us. Well, let's see.

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The asteroids generally are too small and too far away to be seen as discs in even good telescopes. To estimate their size therefore, the best that can be done is to suppose they are made of rock and have the albedo (or reflecting power) of stony bodies. Dark rock, like that of the Moon, reflects only 6 percent of the light that falls upon it, but lighter rock could easily reflect up to 13 or even 16 percent of the light. If we assume some particular albedo for a particular asteroid, then knowing its distance and brightness, the diameter can be calculated.

In the 1890s, however, the American astronomer Edward Emerson Barnard, whose eyesight was legendary, using the 40-inch Yerkes refractor (then, and today, the largest and best of its kind in the world) thought he could just make out the disc-like shapes of the first four asteroids to be discovered — these having been discovered because they were brightest and therefore, presumably, the largest.

From the disc of Ceres, he calculated its diameter to be about 750 kilometers (465 miles) and this is about the diameter I used in my article THE WORLD CERES (F & SF, September 1972), for instance. This seemed to fit in well with albedo expected of a rather light stone. Vesta, however, seemed to have a considerably higher albedo, considering the size Barnard made out for it, and that seemed to pose a mystery.*

However, even Barnard's eyes could just barely make out the discs of those four asteroids, and the measurements of the diameters were therefore pretty chancy.

What if, instead, the problem were tackled from the other end and the albedos were determined by new and sophisticated techniques, by studying the polarization of the reflected light when the asteroid was in different positions in the sky so that the Sun/asteroid/Earth angle changed? Or else, the amount of Sunlight the asteroid absorbed could be determined by measuring its radiation in the infra-red.

By the mid-1970s, it began to appear that many of the asteroids were darker than had been thought, and had albedos considerably lower than that of even the comparatively dark-rocked Moon. These asteroids reflected less light than had been thought and therefore had to be larger than had been estimated.

Ceres, for instance, reflected only 5.4 percent of the light that fell upon it, and its diameter had to be raised from Barnard's earlier estimate to a new diameter of 1,003 kilometers (623 miles). This makes it an even more

*See *LITTLE LOST SATELLITES* (*F&SF, July 1968*)

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respectable world than the one I described in LITTLE LOST SATELLITE.

Ceres' diameter is nearly 30 percent that of our Moon. Its surface area would be 3,140,000 square kilometers (1,190,000 square miles) or about 30 percent that of our fifty states.

A number of asteroids have albedos even lower than that of Ceres (some as low as 2 percent). One way in which such darkness might be explained is to suppose that the asteroidal surface was of basalt. Basalt is a dark igneous rock, however, formed under considerable heat and pressure, and on Earth it is formed chiefly through volcanic action. It is hard to imagine very much volcanic action on even the larger asteroids, however, and no one seriously advances basalt as the explanation.

The alternative is the dark element, carbon. In short, many of the asteroids seem to be akin to the carbonaceous chondrites that occasionally land on the Earth although, to be sure, it may be only the crust that is carbonaceous. For that reason, the dark asteroids may be labelled C.

Brighter asteroids, with albedos in the region of 0.09, may be metallic (M), still brighter ones, 0.13 to 0.16 may be stony (S), and the brightest ones, like Vesta (0.23) still pose a puzzle and their chemistry is considered unknown (U).

From albedo data, the following are now thought to be the twelve largest known asteroids (see Table 1).

Table 1 — The Twelve Largest Asteroids

Order of Discovery	*Name*	*Diameter*		*Classification*
		Kilometers	*Miles*	
1	Ceres	1,003	623	C
2	Pallas	608	378	U
4	Vesta	538	334	U
10	Hygeia	450	280	C
31	Euphrosyne	370	230	C
704	Interamnia	350	218	C
511	Davida	323	201	C
65	Cybele	309	192	C
52	Europa	289	180	C
451	Patientia	276	172	C
15	Eunomia	272	169	S
16	Psyche	250	155	M

NOTE: This table is adapted from one in "Diameters of Minor Planets" by David Morrison in the March, 1977, issue of *Sky and Telescope.*

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The thing that springs to the eye in Table 1 is that, of the dozen largest asteroids, eight, or 67 percent, are in class C.

On the whole, it is expected that the farther from the Sun one goes in the asteroid belt, the cooler the temperatures at the time of formation and the greater the chance for the light elements to accumulate. Furthermore, the best determinations are made on the brighter asteroids which means that for two asteroids of equal size, the one that is nearer the Sun or the one that is of higher albedo (or both, of course) is more likely to be measured accurately. Therefore, a table like Table 1 automatically favors asteroids that are not C, so that the actual percentage of C asteroids should be even higher than would seem from the table.

In fact, the best surmise from the available data is that some 88 percent of all the asteroids are in the C class. Of the asteroids in the inner reaches of the asteroid belt where initial temperatures were highest, perhaps only 50 percent are, but in the outer reaches the percentage of C's may rise to 95.

Now, then, granted that the carbonaceous layer is only on the outer surface of the asteroid and may even be thin, it is the outer surface that is precisely the portion that would most easily be sent flying in shattering and fragmenting collisions.

Therefore, there is nothing in the least strange in arguing optimistically that a large proportion, perhaps even more than 50 percent, of the meteoroids in the inner Solar system are carbonaceous chondrites and that the same proportion of those striking our atmosphere are. It is only the difficulty of surviving atmospheric passage that is giving us trouble.

Well, then, granted we enter the space age in full, we have several choices of how to locate carbonaceous chondrite material if we wish to use it to study the origins of the Solar system and of the possible chemical routes to life.

The first and most obvious alternative is to engage in "space-prospecting" in the vicinity of Earth. In other words, we might keep our eyes open for small objects and try to catch them and study them. Our situation would then be like that of the Greeks of Achilles' time, keeping their eyes open for any meteorites that might be lying around, or like that of the gold prospectors in California and the Yukon, panning streams for fragments of gold.

It would be exciting, but the percentage of failures would be very high.

A second alternative would be to chase after known asteroidal bodies

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in Earth's vicinity for at least part of their orbits — Eros, Icarus, Geographos, Toro.

Unfortunately, all four of these have albedos high enough to indicate they are stony in nature.

In fact, we might pessimistically argue that any meteoroid with an orbit that penetrates the inner Solar system is liable to lose, bit by bit, any carbonaceous outer layer it might have had, through evaporation in the Solar heat. It might be that, after all, the pickings are few out here near Earth and that the comparative rarity of the carbonaceous chondrites that reach our surface is not only caused by their fragility to atmospheric passage, but by their relative rarity in near-by outer space as well.

In that case we might have to pass on to the third alternative, and carry on our search in the asteroid belt.

If we could reach Ceres we would have a sizable body, the sixth largest solid body in the Solar system inside the orbit of Jupiter, with a surface that is very likely carbonaceous, and it might tell us quite a bit.

Ceres is far away, however. Its average close approach to us is about 265,000,000 kilometers (164,000,000 miles) or some four times the average close approach of Mars.

We might do a little better by choosing a closer, if smaller, asteroid. The dark asteroid Feronia is about 75,000,000 kilometers (46,000,000 miles) closer than Ceres is, on the average — an improvement but not enough of one.

Anything else? Yes, there remains a possible fourth alternative.

In the last two essays, I spoke of Phobos and Deimos, the satellites of Mars, and last month I mentioned that they were considerably darker and considerably lower in density than had been expected. They are therefore thought likely to be captured asteroids, and if so they are surely of type C and are carbonaceous chondrite in character.

There's no question that Phobos and Deimos can be reached. We've reached Mars, and, astronomically speaking, Phobos and Deimos are in the same apartment house.

Why then concentrate entirely on Mars? Grant the enormous interest we must have in that planet, but let us not forget the satellites.

Those satellites are the nearest examples of material left totally unchanged since the end of the crater-forming period four billion years ago. Consider, too, that they may be possessed of small quantities of water and organic material which, for four billion years, may well have been

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undergoing chemical evolution without having been disturbed by the heat of passing through Earth's atmosphere or the impact of having collided with Earth's solid mass.

This is not to say that there is the faintest possibility of life-forms on either satellite, but the non-living organic material may give us some hints as to how and what took place in the way of chemical changes (admittedly in the absence of an atmosphere and ocean) and who knows how useful that might be?

It would be the height or irony if, while the Viking landers were busy testing Mars for living organisms in its soil and finding no organic matter there, the real finds were waiting to be made in the tiny asteroids wheeling overhead.

Coming up this year in F&SF – new stories by

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The Reverend Crispen Mobey is the disaster-prone missionary whose bumbling efforts caused terrrible devastation in the Australian outback ("Sooner Or Later Or Never Never," May 1972), in Transylvania ("Lhude Sing Cuccu!" September 1976) and in deep space ("Not With A Bang But A Bleep," June 1976). Here Mobey heads for the South American country of Oblivia on, of all things, a peace-keeping *mission.*

Kingdom Come

by GARY JENNINGS

The Rev. Leroy Earl Kallikak
Monitor of Foreign Missions
Southern Primitive Protestant
Church
World Headquarters
Abysmuth, Mississippi, U.S.A.
Honored Reverend Kallikak:

This S. S. *Pendejo* is a pitifully slow old tramp steamer, without a radio, and the Caribbean islands we have stopped at so far have been such wretched little pimples that I could not bring myself to trust their communications facilities, if any. I would prefer to have sent you a clear and coherent account of my missionary activities in South America before any gossipmongers or newspapers could distress you with a doubtless distorted version — which I fear they have, by now. Anyway, I will mail or cable this report from the first American island we touch, on our wandering way northward, and will hope it reaches you in advance of my own arrival home, so that — well — so that I, Crispin Mobey, can dare to *come* home.

I am anxious to explain my involvement in the unfortuante disasters which have most recently racked the already unfortunate nation of Oblivia. But perhaps this enforced delay in my doing so is all for the best. I have time and leisure to recollect in tranquillity all the hectic happenings which led to my being crowned a king, to my facing a firing squad, and to my being deported from that country. I can dispassionately assess my own role as rather less blameworthy than it might appear in a hurriedly written history.

Time, leisure, tranquillity; yea, I have even monotony, boredom and tedium here. The *Pendejo* is hardly a luxury liner, and its snail's-pace meandering is hardly the kind of cruise depicted on travel posters. The food aboard is on a

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par with what I scavenged from the buzzards in war-torn Oblivia. The sole entertainment aboard is our Armenian captain's every-evening solo on his violin. Since he knows only one piece: that whiny, wheezy, Rimsky-Korsakov thing — "The Plight of the Stumblebum" or whatever it's called — even the voyage of the *Mary Celeste* must have been frolicsome by comparison.

The one good thing I can say for this *Pendejo* ambiance of apathy and torpor is that it reminds me of the dear old Mississippi town of Abysmuth. How thrilled I was to be in Abysmuth for the first time! How enraptured I was to be called for the first time to the veritable World Headquarters of our venerable Southern Primitive Protestant Church! How delighted I was to meet you, Reverend Monitor Kallikak! How excited I was to learn that SoPrim had a new missionary assignment to entrust to me! How appalled I was when you told me:

"Young Mobey, we propose to send you to UNPEEK in Oblivia."

I mean to say, the proposal sounded vaguely indecent. My bewildered dismay must have shown on my face, for you hastened to explain: "UNPEEK is an acronym for United Nations Peace-Keeping Team. The ten-year civil war in Oblivia has just ended."

"I am gratified to hear it, sir," was all I could think to say.

"Have you followed the course of the war, then?"

"No, sir," I had to admit and added in a mumble, "I never heard of it. I've never even heard of Oblivia."

"Nor had I," you said forthrightly, "until the UN sent its urgent request to SoPrim World Headquarters here — that we supply a spiritual adviser to the peace-keeping team they're sending down."

"Down, sir?"

"To South America. Oblivia is in South America. To be frank, that is practically all I know *yet* about Oblivia. That it is one of the smallest countries in South America. And that a civil war between the Right and Left there has just ended in stalemate. I surmise that Oblivia must be one of those Third World places the UN wants to keep uncommitted to either the First or Second World."

"I see," I said, though I didn't. I was sorely perplexed by this sudden plethora of Worlds. At the SoPrim College of Divinity I had been taught that there existed only Heaven, Hell and *the* World in between.

"Look. This is a map of Oblivia. Here on the coast is its capital city — its only city, in fact — Ciudad Ynercia. The war between Oblivia's Right and Left factions has been

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fought to an uneasy truce, but the two sides are still glaring at each other, and the country is in dire chaos. The original truce arbiters, called in from Chile and Cuba, have all ambushed and assassinated each other. A dozen emergency food-supply ships sent by the US and the USSR have yet to be unloaded, because they're zigzagging around the harbor of Ynercia trying to ram each other. The Red Cross has gallantly moved in — perhaps you saw the TV special — and is exerting its every effort and every million to oust the Salvation Army folk who have been quietly doing relief work there, unhonored and unsung, ever since the war broke out ten years ago..."

"Reverend Kallikak," I protested. "I am but a humble missionary. How can I do anything to resolve all these dozens of differences?"

"Leave them to your UNPEEK colleagues," you said. "Those are all political concerns. Ours is spiritual. You see, there is still another rivalry rife in Oblivia. The Ynercia city dwellers are mostly of Spanish descent, hence of the Roman Catholic, er, faith. The country people are mostly indigenes who worship a god or a spirit or something called King Zopilote. There is mutual disdain and distrust between the devotees of these two, um, religions."

"I see!" I exclaimed, comprehending at last. "You are sending me, sir, as a spiritual neuter!"

"Er — a neutral, yes. Impartial, disinterested, unbiased toward either faith. Thus you may be able to effect an amicable meeting of those two opposing religions on a common spiritual ground ..."

You looked expectantly at me until I realized what you were waiting for me to say. "You mean, Reverend Kallikak ... that common ground could be our ...?"

"Exactly. Our Southern Primitive Protestantism. As common as can be."

"To think of it," I murmured in awe. "The instant conversion of an entire nation ..."

"Now, now. That may be too much to hope for. Certainly, SoPrim is not *commanding* you to any such *coup d'éclat.* However, I'm sure you are aware of the great inroads which Mormonism and Christian Science have made in Latin America ..."

I growled, as expected.

"Meanwhile, SoPrim Protestantism has yet to gain even a toehold south of the Bible Belt border. If you, Crispin Mobey, can establish so much as a beachhead in Oblivia ..."

Of course, I had first to be "cleared" for this mission, and so I went next to Washington. At the US State Department, I was di-

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rected to its Division of Obfuscation, through its Bureau of Circumlocution, and into a private room to be interviewed by an agent of the FBIA, or some such. I expected a dashing bravo wearing cloak and dagger, but E. Howard Hunch was a sort of .007 — note the decimal point — a wee, irreducible fraction of a man, with eyes like pewter BBs and a mouth like a coin slot.

"You," he said in a raspy falsetto, jabbing a little tendril of a finger at me, "are the only American citizen going along on this UNPEEK mission. Remember: you represent our - country - right - or - wrong!"

"Well, sure," I said. "But I don't quite see what that has to do with keeping the peace in Oblivia."

"What good is peace anywhere," he snapped, "unless it benefits the United States of America?"

Fearful of forfeiting my clearance, I tried to look simultaneously chastened, patriotic and fanatic.

"Let me put you in the big picture," Hunch went on. "The prime export product of Oblivia — indeed, its one and only product — is guano. The USA needs that guano! Rich in nitrates and phosphates, it is vital to our National Security. Before the civil war intervened, Oblivia's rightfully ruling Rightists had been selling that guano to their revered and beloved Uncle Sam, for the manufacture of explosives to enforce peace throughout the world. The cause of this war was that the treacherous Leftists found they could get twice our price for the country's guano. They wanted to sell it as *fertilizer* to the atheistic collective farms of the godless Soviet Union. And that would have nourished and strengthened America's most implacable enemy, the Communist Colossus!"

I growled, as expected.

"So now the war is over," Hunch continued, "and the interrupted guano shipments will resume. A new Oblivian government will be chosen by plebiscite. We don't care whether those greasers choose a president, a king, a dictator, so long as he is on the Right side — on the side of God and the Free World. As America's only representative on this mission, Mobey, you must work to maintain our supply of guano for munitions."

"Excuse me, Mister Hunch. But what *is* guano? Something like nuclear power?"

No, I learned to my surprise, it is merely the waste excreted by birds — though Hunch put this in rather coarser terms. "Oblivia's guano is the world's most potent," he added, "because it is the (excrement) of *zopilotes*, black buzzards, the only species of bird which lives in that blighted country. Now, you

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will be operating without portfolio, Mobey, but I'll give you a hint on how to proceed. Oblivia has no standing army or navy. But the strongman who seizes control of its air force will hold the destiny of the country."

"Mister Hunch," I protested. "I am but a humble missionary!"

"The Oblivian Air Force consists of one observation balloon converted from an old Battle of Britain barrage sausage. Simply grab the crank of its tether-rope winch and you are in command. That is your objective, Crispin Mobey: the crank!"

Crispin - Mobey - the - crank, I kept whispering to myself, as, flushed with the now-doubled importance of my mission, I moved on to UN Headquarters in New York to meet my fellows of the UNPEEK team. Like myself, they had been screened and selected for their disinterested impartiality; all four of them were from unaligned countries.

There was the glossy black, impeccably tailored John Brownsbody Ngongo, who, besides being a delegate from neutral Angola, was a member of the Soul Brothers Liberation Front. There was the slightly sinister Atrociteo Anarchistes, representing neutral Greece and, on the side, The Society for the Prevention of Society. Representing neutral Ireland (as well as something called the IRAgulars) was the bawling, brawling, swashbuckling Captain Rory O'Ho. From neutral Canada, theare was the muscular and crew-cut lady delegate, Ms. Mabel Leaf MacPerson, already justly famous as the author of *Pauline Bunyan and Her Great Pink Ox*.

Our briefing officer smiled at us and began, "Welcome, team. The UN is confident that you five will work together as smoothly and congenially as any other typical UN conclave. Now — to put you in the big picture, lady and gentlemen —"

"Black and honkies!" shouted Mr. Ngongo.

"UNPEEKpersons!" shouted Ms. MacPerson.

"True Catholic and southpaws!" shouted Captain O'Ho.

"Comrades!" shouted Mr. Anarchistes.

"American and foreigners!" I felt constrained to shout in turn.

"This is the current situation in Oblivia," said the briefing officer. "I am happy to report that there has been little destruction wrought by the civil war there, mainly because there is so little in Oblivia to destroy, but partly because the warring forces had little in the way of armaments and munitions —"

"I protest," shouted Mr. Anarchistes, "your being happy about the underadvantaged condition of

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our Oblivian comrades!"

"Also," the briefing officer continued, "there was a surprising underkill and a minimal head count. Again, partly because of the lack of weaponry, but mostly because the Oblivian indigenes are notoriously unwarlike and squeamish about bloodshed —"

"I protest," shouted Mr. Ngongo, "your ethnic slur on our red soul brothers!"

"In fact," the briefing officer doggedly went on., "the opposing Right and Left forces mainly used the war as an excuse to rape each other's undefended womenfolk—"

"I protest," shouted Ms. MacPerson, "any UN recognition of such sexist male chauvinist pigs!"

"The practice of rape," explained the briefing officer, "is a traditional Oblivian excuse for *waging* war. By this I mean the Oblivian women are so ugly that the Oblivian men can do their part in maintaining the national birthrate only by enraging themselves into a frenzy and —"

"I protest this weaseling excuse for underpopulation!" shouted Captain O'Ho. "His O'Holiness will have a wurrud to say about —"

"*And so*" — the briefing officer himself was shouting by now — "the UN wishes you every success in keeping the peace in Oblivia. Since you were all five screened and selected for neutrality, for impartiality, and for having no partisan axes to grind, the UN trusts that you will perform in the best traditions of the UN."

On the journey south — perhaps because none had an ax to grind — my colleagues ground their teeth at each other and viciously impugned each other's nationality, personality, ideology, morals and motives for going to Oblivia in the first place. The insults abated only when all four stopped speaking to anybody but me. On the first leg of our trip — to Caracas, the airport nearest Oblivia — we five had an entire chartered 747 to ourselves, but the other four sat in corners of the cabin as far apart as possible, while I spent the flight scurrying among them as a sort of ventriloquized messenger boy, delivering epithets and obloquies.

In between errands, I concentrated on studying my Spanish grammar textbook and *Tourist's Guide to Oblivia on 5¢ a Day.* I learned, for example, the intricacies of the Oblivian currency: 100 of the lead coins called heroes equal one tin coin called a general; 100 tin generals equal one paper banknote called a dictator; and, at the current rate of exchange, 272.57 paper dictators equal one US dollar.

Fortunately, my colleagues were all too seasick on our next and last

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leg of the journey — by fishing smack to Oblivia's coastal capital — to transmit any messages, snide or otherwise, and I was too sick to carry them. We all got even sicker when we smelled Ciudad Ynercia long before we sighted it. In the harbor, our boatman threaded his smack among the ponderously maneuvering American and Russian mercy ships, still clumsily trying to ram and sink each other.

Ashore, Ms. MacPerson kindly lent us each a dainty handkerchief drenched in her Hai Karate after-shave lotion. Holding these to our noses, we slithered up the dock, slimy with buzzard excrement, thence up the muddy Gran Avenida Buena Vista toward our VIP suite in the squalid Gran Hotel Elegante. We walked warily through crowds of miserably tattered and pustuled Oblivians squatting and gnawing on moldy tortillas. Sure enough, the Oblivian women were as ugly as we had been told — though no more so, I should say, than our own Ms. MacPerson.

We also passed through the main Plaza de Libertad, a muddy quadrangle decorated only with rival Freedom statues glaring at each other from either end. The Freedom statue erected by the Leftists was a leaden depiction of Che Guevara, with a glued-on Brillo beard, aiming a Czechoslovakian machine pistol at the opposing Freedom statue erected by the Rightists: a leaden simulacrum of J. Edgar Hoover, aiming at Guevara a Japanese-brand bug-type microphone. Both statues were heavily patina'd with buzzard droppings.

When we had rested briefly at the decrepit Elegante, and had got back our land legs and our stomachs, we convened a meeting in the gutted and roofless National Palace. There we sat down with the truculent parties to the truce: the two men who had led the Rightists and Leftists during the civil war and who each now aspired to head the prospective new Oblivian government.

On the Right, Generalisimo Comandante Dictator-Designate Franco Milhous Caudillo wore a Ruritanian uniform, quite threadbare but encrusted with medals, tarnished gold braid, sashes and crossed bandoleers full of spent cartridge cases. On the left, People's Hero Comandante Commissar-Designate Sacco Vanzetti Rojo wore a Graustarkian uniform, quite patched but encrusted with medals, tarnished gold braid, sashes and a Cossack sword. Also in attendance was the local Roman Catholic primate, a foreigner named Father Simony, and a wizened, breech-clouted little witch doctor of the King Buzzard cult, Don Curandero Brujo.

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Since the conference was conducted mostly in Spanish and mostly through interpreters who were even harder to understand than the conferees, I will not report the ensuing hours in detail. But, in gist, the situation imperiling the truce was this:

The Rightist Generalisimo wanted to resume selling Oblivia's guano to the gringo Octopus of the North — i.e., the USA — even at a puny price, so as to stay on good terms with the octopus and be allowed to buy and import American products. The Leftist People's Hero wanted to sell Oblivia's guano to the Soviet Union, which offered a much higher price, so that the profits would enable the purchase of even more American products. On only one point were the Right and Left agreed. Each yearned to remold Oblivia in the Great American Image by flooding the country with indispensable consumer goods.

"We have been too long submerged in the Third World!" declared the Generalisimo. "We demand the luxuries enjoyed by the gringo Octopus of the North! Mood rings! Granola! Zip codes! Those electric kitchen machines that make soggy crackers crisp again!"

"Our Oblivian soul brothers," Mr. Ngongo chimed in, "must no longer be deprived of everything that makes life worth living!"

"But, Senor Generalisimo," I timidly ventured. "The Oblivian people eat only tortillas, and those don't get —".

"Then we demand soggy crackers!" interrupted the People's Hero. "Drive-in funeral parlors! Gatorade! Those electric testing machines that assure the perfect roundness of a golfer's balls!"

"Underdeveloped no longer!" yelled Mr. Anarchistes. "Let that be the rallying cry of our Oblivian comrades!"

"But, Senor People's Hero," I timidly ventured. "Oblivia doesn't even have electricity, let along golf —"

"Pet rocks! Junk food!" Both the Generalisimo and the People's Hero outshouted me and bellowed on in contrapuntal ecstasy: "Paste-on TV games! Peanut-shaped love seats! And we are weary of our cheap wooden wagons — we demand American cars with their metal panels expensively painted to look like wood! Cheez-Whiz! Froot Loops! Bacon Bits! The real, the good, the true!"

The meeting broke up then, having become intolerable. Ynercia's buzzards had come to their evening roost on the onetime roof's bare beams overhead, and were making their presence known. I departed, wiping myself with Ms. MacPerson's hanky and with a feeling of real relief that my UN-

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PEEK colleagues, not I, would have to cope with Oblivia's political quandaries.

Nevertheless, my night's sleep — in the VIP sty assigned me in the Elegante hovel — was interrupted by the sneaking-in, one after another, of the Generalisimo, the People's Hero, Father Simony and witch doctor Brujo. Each of them, whispering, offered me the identical bribe of D10,000 (ten thousand dictators) for my promise of support in their several causes. In order of arrival, they wanted me to help exterminate all the Leftists, to help exterminate all the Rightists, to help exterminate the heathen indigenous Indians, and to help exterminate the johnny-come-lately Catholic Spaniards. Aside from the fact that D10,000 is worth only about $36.75 in real money, I was not tempted, and told them so.

The next morning, I rummaged in my Missionary's KampKit, got out the two spray cans of white and black paint, for dark and light surfaces respectively, and went about the city on the first stage of my SoPrim conversion campaign. I had laboriously translated into Spanish our church's standard message for painting on roadside rocks and the like. Quite nicely and succinctly, too, I thought:

Cristo Rey Viene
Sea Listo
Cojalo

I had sprayed this on a couple of dozen adobe house walls and was spraying it with flourishes on the guano-streaked facade of the National Palace, when a steely voice behind me said, in English, "Mister Morbid, or whatever your name is, may I ask what you think you're doing?"

I turned to find Father Simony and Captain O'Ho regarding me and my work. I said stiffly, "The Reverend Crispin Mobey, if you please. I am painting a message to the populace. It says 'Christ the King is coming. Be ready. Catch hold of Him.' Surely even a Papist like you cannot object to the sentiment."

"No," said Father Simony, "but a linguist could. 'Christ the King is coming,' that's all right. But the third-person imperative of the verb *ser*, 'to be,' is indistinguishable from the third-person subjunctive. And in the vernacular, *listo* can mean either 'ready' or 'clever, cunning.' But, worst of all, my God, the verb *coger* ..."

"Means to catch, to hold," I said.

"In the Castilian Spanish of Spain, yes. Over here in Latin America, it has been vulgarly debased. To the man on the street, it means to copulate violently, to engage in forcible sexual intercourse."

Captain O'Ho murmured in

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horror, "Begorrah!" Then, in a thunderous voice, he retranslated my painted exhortation: "Christ he King is coming! He may be cunning! [ ] Him!"

Equally horrified, I hastily sprayed over the second two lines, leaving only "Christ the King is coming."

"In any event, " Father Simony said dryly, "the faithful of Ynercia don't need the message, and the redskins of the boondocks won't understand it. I've barely educated them as far as God the Father and am just beginning on Mother Mary. It'll be another decade or two before they fully comprehend the nature of Christ the Son."

Dishearted, I sprayed over "Christ" and left only "The King is coming." Then I scuttled to retrace my path and obliterate all those lines which could be misinterpreted. However, at the first painted wall I came to, I found a crowd of ragged indigenes already collected, a literate one reading my words aloud and the rest of the crowd muttering confusedly. As I started spraying away, one skinny and scrofulous red man plucked at my sleeve and croaked, "Crease?"

"?Si? (Yes?)," I responded, thinking he was trying to speak my name. *"Soy yo.* (I am I.)" His bleary eyes widened in astonishment.

"!Milagro!" he bellowed to the crowd and pointed at me. *"!Este hombre es el Rey — el listo!"*

"Now wait a minute," I tried to expostulate, but the crowd was scattering in all directions, every man, woman and child yelling, *"!Ya viene el Rey!"* As well as I could make out, they were mistakenly announcing to the world that the King, the cunning one, had already come and that I was He.

This troubled me a bit. But eventually I had corrected all my earlier writings, had added another few score notices that "The King is coming" (without elaboration), and now found myself on the outskirts of Ynercia. I continued on into the guano-encrusted countryside of roads ankle-deep in guano, of cactuses and trees bending under their weight of guano, of wretched adobe huts roofed with guano, of great flocks of repulsive black zopilotes continually flapping overhead and excreting still more guano. All of this Oblivian outdoors reeked so abominably that, even breathing through the perfumed hanky, I nearly gagged on the stench. Still I pressed on and, whenever I could find a rock face not entirely covered with guano, sprayed on it: "The King is coming."

Late in the afternoon, I came upon a surprising sight in that guano-blanketed land: a great mound of olive-green rubberized cloth, as big as a hill, billowing

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slightly in the stinking breeze. Not until I saw the bathtublike wicker basket lying beside it did I realize that this was the observation balloon E. Howard Hunch had spoken of. A wire cable led from the somewhat underinflated and flaccid sausage to a rusty machine nearby: a drum wrapped in coils of the cable and connected by interlocking cogs to a heavy crank. As Hunch had commanded, I immediately clamped both hands firmly on the crank.

I stood there for several minutes — during which no clamoring horde of Oblivians materialized to shout in acclaim, "Strongman Crispin Mobey has seized the air force and holds the destiny of the country!" — until it occurred to me to let the balloon go up in silent but unmistakable proclamation. Accordingly, I turned the crank backward and the cable began to drop off the drum in loose loops, but the gigantic sausage continued to lie dispiritedly on the ground. Then I realized that its rounded upper surface was so thickly caked with guano that its meager content of gas was insufficient to lift it.

"Ah, Reverend Moldy," a voice suddenly said in English. "You have discovered the Oblivian Air Force."

"Mobey," I said automatically, looking about me at the wasteland empty of everything but guano. Then I espied the heads of Atrociteo Anarchistes and People's Hero Rojo poking over the rim of the balloon's observation basket. They both looked sheepishly guilty, as if I had surprised them in some secret and conspiratorial confab. Which obviously I had. Exchanging furtive glances, they climbed out of the basket and joined me at the winch.

"This," said the People's Hero in Spanish, Anarchistes translating, "is Oblivia's secret weapon."

"How so?" I asked. "It won't even go up."

"It does whenever we scrape the [excrement] off."

"And then what does it do?"

"Nothing. Except keep the superstitious *indios* willing to fight. They are awed and impressed by this visible evidence of us white men's science and technology. The balloon is so plainly superior to their mythical and pitiful *Rey Zopilote*, you see. So the *indios* can be pressed into service by both the Left and Right. Some fight on the side which has control of the winch crank. Some fight on the other side, to wrest away that control. If it weren't for the balloon, neither my liberating Left nor the Generalisimo's rotten Right could ever have an army, could ever have a war."

"Ah," I said, an idea beginning to take form in my fertile brain.

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"So please, young man, do not play with the machinery. As soon as this foolish truce ends, both my Left and Caudillo's Right will have need of the Oblivian Air Force to get back to business as usual."

With that, the two took their leave. I waited until they were out of sight before hurrying, by a different route, back toward the city. I believed I had an idea that would put an end to this ceaseless and fruitless war in Oblivia forever. Suppose the *people*, not the self-appointed leaders, held control of the air force .... But I could not, in conscience, put the idea into action entirely on my own. The UN had enjoined me to work "smoothly and congenially" as a team member "in the best traditions of the UN."

All too flagrantly, colleague Anarchistes was in league with the People's Hero Leftist forces acting on behalf of the Communist Colossus. Colleague O'Ho was apparently hand-in-glove with Father Simony and the Ynercia Catholic minority trying to maintain white supremacy over Oblivia's majority of red indigenes. Those two teammates were lost to me. But John Brownsbody Ngongo seemed sincerely eager to liberate *all* soul brothers — and Ms. Mabel Leaf MacPerson all soul *sisters* — regardless of color, creed or ideology. If I could wangle their support, we three would constitute an UNPEEK quorum and the UN would have to endorse our any action.

My entrance into Ynercia was impeded by a fairly large parade coming out of the city, led by Don Curandero Brujo. They were all indigenes, all ugly, all sickly, crippled, starved and barely able to stagger along. But they were dancing, as well as they were able, and feebly chanting what I took to be down - with - the - oppressors war cries, while waving a stuffed zopolite atop a tall pole. Considering that the air of Oblivia was chock-a-block with real live buzzards, from fence-post level to the stratosphere, I could see little point in their flourishing a dead and stuffed one. But this zopilote, though execrably eczemic and motheaten, did have a more than ordinarily enormous wingspread, a more than ordinarily nauseous bald head, and the fearsome beak of Sinbad's roc. I assumed it was the natives' idol of their Rey Zopilote, but wondered why they had chosen this day to flaunt it.

I soon found out. On catching sight of me, the whole procession yelled "Crease!" in unison. They broke ranks and surrounded me, waving the ossified buzzard in my face; it smelled even worse than any live one. There was a confused babble of *"¡Ya vino nuestro Rey! ¡Ya vamos a vencer!"* ("Our king has arrived! We shall overcome!").

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I shoved the ghastly buzzard out of my face and fended off the affectionately pawing paws of the mob, but all the while thinking, "This could work to the benefit of my peace plan." I shouted and gestured until the milling mob was silent. Then, in my Pidgin-Spanglish, I managed to convey part of my idea to "my subjects," as they evidently now considered themselves.

"Yea, verily," I spake unto them, "the Rey Zopilote will conquer! Oblivia for the Oblivians!" (Concert of ragged cheers.) "But first there are preparations to be made!" And, with Don Brujo helping to translate, I told them what to do. I pointed back the way I had come, where they would find the Oblivian Air Force, instructed them to go there, to scrape from the balloon its burden of guano, and to do it carefully, so as not to puncture the gas bag. Then they were to winch the balloon solidly to the ground until further notice.

When Don Brujo and I had got this across, my subjects all nodded eagerly. "Then," said I, "meet me again tomorrow morning, at the field of the Oblivian Air Force. We will seize it from the white eyes which speak with forked tongues. No more Left or Right, no more war! All Oblivia will be yours, my people, and peace will reign!" They gave a wheezy huzzah of approbation and staggered weakly off in the direction of the downed balloon.

In the deepening twilight, I went on into the city and arrived at the Gran Hotel Elegante at first dark. Father Simony and Rory O'Ho were waiting for me, wearing black looks.

"Jaysus and the natives are ristliss tonight," O'Ho said accusingly. "There do be ominous currints astir. 'Tis all your doing, Mobey maneen, wid them nonsinsical missages."

Complacently I murmured, "One of my favorite lines from the Bible is that God moves in a mysterious way ..."

"That's not from the Bible!" snorted Father Simony. "It's from the poet Cowper, who spent most of his life in lunatic asylums. And speaking of which, have you heard about Ms. MacPerson's tragedy?"

It seems the Canadian lady had gone out like myself, earlier in the day, to trudge inland through the guano wastes, in search of Oblivian women to whom she could preach liberation from chauvinist male domination and discrimination. She was determined to convince the females that they deserved equal rights and opportunities: to shovel guano like any man, to be paid the same starvation wages, to be conscripted for battle in wartime — in short, to live and work and die in misery equal to that of their

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wretched menfolk. Unfortunately, before Ms. MacPerson could find any country women to enlighten, she had met a dozen or so male guerrillas coming down from the guano-capped mountains of the interior.

"Up there they had heard nothing of the truce," said the priest. "When they encountered Ms. MacPerson, all of them unenthusiastically but dutifully raped her. The outrage drove the poor woman so insane that she went to the Red Cross for help. They are trying to calm her with coffee and donuts at a nominal charge, but she goes into a gibbering fit at the sight of the donut holes."

"Dear me," I said.

"She talks wildly of immuring herself in a monastery for the rest of her life."

"Dear me," I said again, truly concerned. For if Mabel Leaf MacPerson was now hopelessly *non compos mentis*, I could not command a majority of the UNPEEK team, even if I won the cooperation of John Brownsbody Ngongo. I inquired as to his whereabouts.

"When last seen," said O'Ho, "him and the Generalisimo were after guarding the dockside warehouses."

"Warehouses? Guarding what against what?"

"Protecting the guano against saboteurs. Whisht, I told ye the natives are acting suspicious like. Thim ould sheds by the docks are full to the rafters wid ten years' supply of guano unsold and stockpiled during the war. Now, mind ye, that's Oblivia's only resource, its only treasury. And dried buzzard [excrement] is as ixplosive as a leprechaun's timper. If the pagans go on the warpath and take a notion to fire thim warehouses, we might's well give this country back to the Injins. Not the US, the USSR nor the UN would give divil a hoot for the fate of Oblivia widout its guano."

"Maybe," I mused, "that would be best for all concerned."

Father Simony said sharply, "The Generalisimo, the People's Hero, the local guano tycoons have all agreed, Mobey, that you must cease your meddling. You will retire to your suite and, to make sure you stay there out of mischief, we're posting armed guards at your door."

The guards, two mestizo anthropoids of the Oblivian National Police, armed with buzzard-shot muzzle-loaders, marched me upstairs to my sty and locked me in. This did not bother me overmuch. When my supper tray was brought up — a meal evidently concocted from buzzard-leavings — I ate it with composure, said my prayers with humility and went to bed with a clear conscience. I slept serene in

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the realization that, since the UNPEEK team had now been so disastrously fragmented, I should *have* to implement my peace-keeping measures on my own ....

In the morning, I easily eluded my guards by the simple ruse of indicating that I had to visit the, er, restroom out back of the hotel. As I expected, the two thugs chose not to accompany me on my trudge through the backyard quagmire of mixed mud and guano. I made my rest stop, but then kept going, away from the hotel and toward the city limits. I could not help noticing that, as Captain O'Ho had said, there *was* unrest in Ynercia. Even this early in the day, mutinous-sounding crowd noises reverberated through the streets roundabout.

At midmorning I found Don Brujo and "my people," as I had come to think of them, camped a respectful distance from the Oblivian Air Force. The big balloon was clean now and was prevented from liftoff only by its shroud lines' being hauled tight to the winch. All my people stood up in salute and maintained a reverent silence as I pulled the pin securing the crank. I didn't have to turn it. The crank whirled in a blur and narrowly missed breaking my arm. Simultaneously, the great gas bag bounded upward and soared into the sky. Simultaneously too, and much to the surprise of us watchers, it emitted an unearthly howl of fright.

Not until then did I notice a black and a white face peeping horrified over the rim of the observation basket as it swiftly dwindled Heavenward. Clearly, I had again interrupted a secret and conspiratorial confab, this time between Generalisimo Caudillo and Mr. Ngongo. Too late, I discovered that the end of the balloon's tether cable was not secured to the winch. It slid loose from the twirling drum, and the Oblivian Air Force went drifting off unfettered, its cable trailing and its passengers wailing.

Don Brujo and his tribe danced and yelled in childish delight at this development. I cried urgently, "Follow it!" and we all loped off in pursuit of the celestial sausage as it wobbled in the general direction of Ciudad Ynercia. If we failed to catch the thing, it would drift entirely off the continent of South America and out to sea.

We galloped across the field where the tent and PR headquarters of the Red Cross were set up, and a disheveled Ms. MacPerson emerged to see what the commotion was about. She looked up at the barrage balloon and evidently mistook it for a bird foreign to Oblivia. She gasped, "Flying cock!" and fell back into the tent with a screech.

Just then, the morning sky went

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dark with the gathering of about a million black zopilotes, cawing raucously and homing in on the gas bag. They all appeared eager for their own morning rest stop and seemed excited to have discovered the one object in Oblivia not already covered with guano. Scores of them settled atop the balloon while hundreds more fought for roosting space, and all immediately began contributing to a new encrustation. The balloon began logily to lose altitude under the combined weight of buzzards and buzzard droppings. Its tether cable was again dragging the ground.

"Hurry!" I panted to my troop. "Now we can grab hold!"

Hearing no response, I turned to see that my people were no longer following me, or even running. They were all prostrate on the ground, making a sort of salaam. Only Don Brujo remained standing, his face aglow with revelation. As well as I could make out, he was exultantly chanting that "The white men's big bird is not all-powerful! Our own King Zopilote has prevailed!"

He had a point. The big sausage, now over the city, began to buckle and fold. The swarming buzzards' talons had punctured its rubberized skin. It came down slowly at first, then faster, then plummeted directly onto the city's dockside area. I can only surmise that the bag had contained flammable hydrogen gas and that either the Generalisimo or Ngongo had been incautiously smoking a cigar, or something. For the balloon disappeared in a flash of blue flames, instantly succeeded by a sustained and crackling roar as the explosion ignited the warehouses full of ten-year-dried guano.

My people enveloped me in a mass embrace, all babbling (I gathered) that the upstart Spanish conquistadores had at last been vanquished; that the pre-Columbian kingdom of Oblivia had been restored to the kingship of King Zopilote; and that I, Crease, the cunning one, would henceforth reign as the human embodiment of His Vulturine Majesty. When I struggled free of the celebratory melee, I found that I had been invested with a ponderous lead helmet in the shape of a buzzard's head and a uniform even more gaudy than that of the Generalisimo or the People's Hero.

Don Brujo and the rest then scampered off to carry the epochal news to the farthermost corners of Oblivia, and I was alone. It was my first experience of being a king, and — I must confess, Reverend Kallikak — I rather felt I deserved it. After all, I had accomplished UNPEEK's mission of untangling Oblivia's snarled politics once and for all. I had prevented the Com-

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munist Colossus from battening upon Oblivia's guano. And now, as king, I could, like Constantine or Henry VIII, decree a new state religion — Southern Primitive Protestantism, of course — as soon as I could wean the indigenes away from their buzzard cult. For the nonce, however, I deemed it prudent for me to remain out here in the empty and malodorous countryside until the nation — and especially the cityfolk of Ynercia — got accustomed to the idea of a new regime.

Regrettably, though, my people had not thought to make any provision for Their Majesty's sustenance. Or perhaps they assumed that, as a human King Buzzard, I ought to know how to scavenge for myself. So that is what I did: fighting off other zopilotes for a share of their carrion finds and drinking from the same polluted alkali waterholes they frequented. The resulting derangement of my bowels was so severe that I could barely restrain myself from the desperate resort of throwing myself on the mercy of the Red Cross. But a week of diarrhea, wilderness, stench, solitude and scavenging was all I could take. I turned my now-faltering steps toward the city. Ready or not, Ynercia would have to receive me as its king.

Ynercia was *not* ready and I was received as Public Enemy No. 1. I was immediately seized by those same two goons of the Oblivian National Police and quick-marched to the National Palace. On the way, I noticed a curious emptiness about the Plaza de Libertad. My captors told me the two Freedom statues had been melted down for ammunition, with which the defenders of Ynercia had so far repelled the repeated assaults by Don Brujo's unarmed heathen forces during the week I had been gone.

Then I was hustled into the palace and hauled up before a bewigged and black-gowned *ad hoc* tribunal composed of People's Hero Rojo, Father Simony, Atrociteo Anarchistes, Captain Rory O'Ho, Generalisimo Caudillo and John Brownsbody Ngongo. I was happy to see the latter two still alive, though deplorably singed and hairless. None of the tribunal appeared particularly happy to see *me* alive. The indictment was read:

"You stand accused, Crispin Mobey, of having violated the laws of the Sovereign Nation of Oblivia on forty-two counts, in that you (1) have bankrupted the country by totally destroying its sole repository of negotiable resources, (2) have disrupted the nation's hard-won state of truce and peace by (3) inciting insurgent elements to rebellion, thus (4) sundering the country into opposing camps, thus (5) subjecting the nation's capital to

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a state of siege, with attendant destruction and casualties. Furthermore, you (6) have unlawfully seized command of the country's hitherto purely defensive air arm and subverted it to warlike purposes by (7) causing the Oblivian Air Force to commit an offensive attack — nay, a *kamikaze* attack — upon Oblivia itself. Furthermore, you (8) have caused the Sovereign Nation of Oblivia to be held up to international ridicule and opprobrium, in that (9) mercy vessels preparing to unload relief supplies have now steamed away in derisive scorn. Furthermore, you have (10) violated the statutes forbidding foreign nationals from engaging in any occupation reserved for Oblivian citizens — e.g., piracy, smuggling, brothel-keeping, drug-trafficking, et cetera — specifically in that (11) you, an alien, did allow yourself to be proclaimed king, an office open only to Oblivian nationals...."

Anarchistes interrupted to say, "All the foregoing charges are capitally punishable by firing squad. Must the good padre bother to read the other thirty-one counts?"

"I guess not," I said resignedly and bowed my lead-crowned head.

"Thin have ye anything to say in your difinse?" asked O'Ho.

"Yes, Captain. Look at the composition of your kangaroo tribunal. Whatever else I have done, I have closed the gulf between Left and Right. I have united the opposing factions which kept Oblivia in a state of civil war for ten years."

"Bah!" said Father Simony. "You have merely turned a trivial political dispute into the bloodiest religious war since the Cristero Revolution in Mexico fifty years ago. How finds the tribunal?"

"Guilty on all counts!" Ngongo snarled vindictively. He was echoed by each of the others.

Father Simony intoned, "On each count, Crispin Mobey, you are sentenced to die by firing squad. The tribunal only regrets that the sentences cannot be imposed consecutively. Officers, take him to the wall. If you so desire, Mobey, as soon as I can get out of this wig and into my vestments, I shall join you there to give you last rites."

The policemen marched me out the back door of the palace, stood me against its back wall and tied my hands behind me. One of them proffered a limp cigarette from a crumpled pack.

"*No, gracias,*" I said. "The Surgeon General has determined ..."

They shrugged, turned, stepped a measured five paces away, then turned again to face me and began inspecting their muzzle-loaders. I was gloomily reflecting that their blunderbuss buzzard-shot was

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going to make a mess of me, when Father Simony and the other judges emerged from the palace. The policemen called to them, and a lengthy colloquy ensued, of which I caught only snatches as I stood perceptibly sinking into the guano underfoot.

"... No ammunition?"

"And no more statues to melt ..."

"... His own helmet?"

"And risk more ridicule for Oblivia ...?"

"Must save face some way ..."

"... I think I've got it."

That last was Ngongo, and he came to me to say, "The tribunal has decided to show leniency, Mobey. It was the United States that gave you to us, and we think it only fair that we return the affliction. If you will go home, we will suspend the execution until such time as you should ever come back to Oblivia."

I had to make a choice that is demanded of few men. Give up my kingdom or give up my life. I felt more like the eighth Edward, now, than the eighth Henry. It was an historic event, even if history chooses not to record it. After a terrible moment of soul-searching, I sighed, acceded to the bargain, and we all trooped in a body down to the devastated dockside.

There was only one ship in the harbor now: this rusty S.S. *Pendejo*, which had put in to buy a cargo of buzzard feathers for some artsy-craftsy American firm which manufactures artsy-archaic ballpoint quill pens. I was marched up the gangplank and presented to the English-speaking first mate.

"You," said Father Simony, "will transport this man to the United States."

"This here's a freighter," said the officer. "We don't take paying passengers."

"I don't have any money," I said.

"We definitely don't take non-paying passengers."

"Sure and ye'll weigh anchor immejitly," blustered Captain O'Ho, "and take this spalpeen wid ye, or the Oblivian Air Force will blow your ship out of the water."

The mate ejaculated, "Well, frigate!" — a nautical oath, if ever I heard one. But he complied and began shouting orders to the crew to cast off. Within an hour, Ciudad Ynercia was out of sight and, within a day, all Oblivia was out of nose range.

What more can I write, Reverend Kallikak? I did my utmost to bring both pagan and Papist Oblivia into the SoPrim fold, and I find it hard to blame myself for the whims of fate which dictated otherwise. Oh, I know the calumnies that have been heaped upon me. From the rumors (and leers and sneers and wisecracks) I have encountered

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at the island ports along our way, I know that Oblivia is still in the throes of a war-against-itself, that it has huffily recalled its ambassadors from every foreign country (notably ours), that it has resigned from the United Nations, seceded from South America and set itself up as the first and only country of what it calls the Fourth World.

But look at it this way, sir. When I came to Oblivia, it had been ravaged by a politically motivated civil war. When I left Oblivia, it was being ravaged by a *religiously* motivated bloodbath. And isn't religious motivation a missionary's stock in trade? Bear only that in mind, Reverend Kallikak, and I think you can bear no ill will toward

Yours truly religiously,
Crispin Mobey

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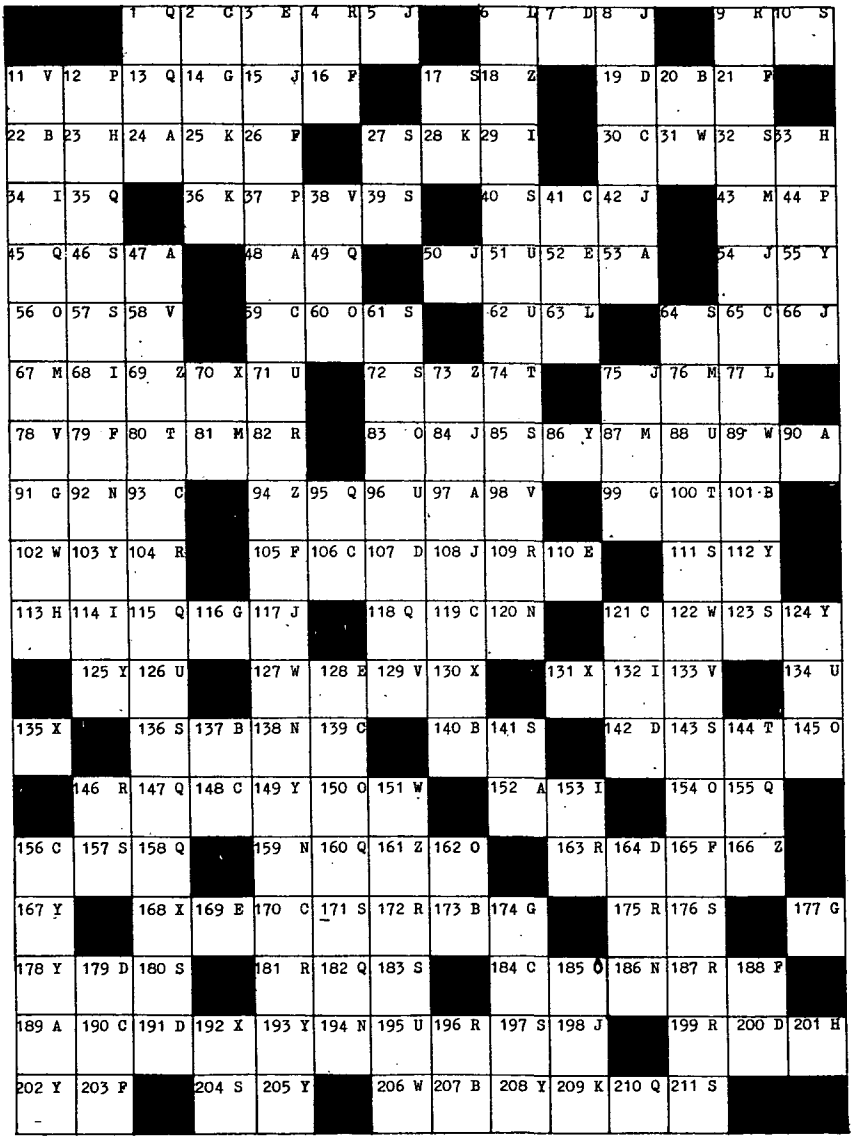

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by Georgia F. Adams

This puzzle contains a quotation from a work of science fiction. First, guess as many of the clues as you can and write the word or words in the numbered blanks in the puzzle. (The end of a line in the diagram doesn't mean the end of a word.) If you have answered the clues correctly, you will see words forming in the puzzle blocks. Fill in the missing letters and put them in the numbered spaces opposite the clues. That will help you guess those words and therefore get more of the puzzle, and so on. The first letters of the correctly answered clues will spell out the name of the author and the title of the work from which the quotation is taken.

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207	173	137	140	101	22	20

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184	156	106	121	65	41	148	93	59	139	190

30	2	119	170	

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19	7	107	142	164	191	200	179

E. *To draw forth*

128	110	169	52	3

F. With *The*, a Ted Thomas *F&SF* story

165	188	203	105	79	26	21	16

G. It's good to have all these Atheling critiques at hand

91	14	99	116	174	177

H. Delany's star

33	23	201	113

I. The darkness under the Earth

29	68	34	114	132	153

J. H.K. or Lawrence O'Donnell

108	84	66	15	8	50	54	42	198	5	75

117

K. He predicted the current boom

209	36	25	28

L. _____ Me, by Phillifent

63	6	77

M. A kind of sorcery

87	43	67	81	76

N. Christian name of author of "Good News from the Vatican"

194	186	159	138	120	92

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O. A sudden insight

150 83 154 145 185 56 60 162

P. SF Wave of the late 60's

12 44 37

Q. Found inside *The People Trap* (Sheckley). (3 wds.) (with *The*)

49 35 13 147 158 160 155 210 118 115 182

45 95 1

R. Adams' chronicle (2 wds.)

163 172 175 109 4 187 9 196 146 104 181

199 82

S. You saw it first in *F&SF*, by Shirley Jackson (5 wds.)

204 197 157 176 85 180 57 141 46 32 10

61 123 39 72 17 183 211 64 143 40

171 111 136 27

T. Deirdre's robe was made of metal _____

80 144 74 100

U. Birthplace of Anderson's Dancer

134 126 71 51 88 195 96 62

V. Principal ingredient of Greek Fire

58 38 11 98 133 78 129

W. A backwoods euphemism

127 31 151 122 206 89 102

X. Creator of *My Lord Barbarian*

131 192 168 70 135 130

Y. Panshin's pride

208 125 124 178 193 205 112 167 149 86 103

55 202

Z. Current craze

18 166 94 69 73 161

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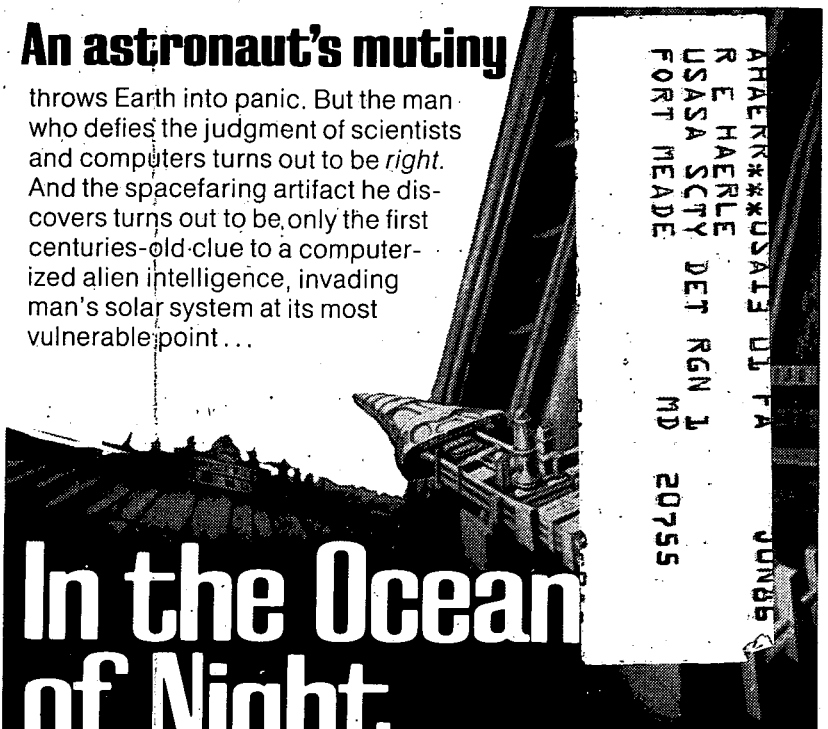

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